Hisui

by Shivani

Summary

Hisui always knew he was special. He also knew his original name wasn’t Hisui. His parents threw him away like trash; he would make it on his own. Becoming a hitman? Not that big of a step.

Notes

Warnings: slash, extreme canon mangling, damaged!Harry, not-at-all-like-canon!Harry, time skips, identity hopping, cross-dressing, elements of crack (again, we’re dealing with a manga that starts out as comedic, so it’s inevitable, though I do try to find vaguely plausible reasons for some of it), OCs

Beta: —

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Notes:

1. This drops straight into things, without any backstory. You get stuff in dribbles along the
way, so prepare to be confused for a while as to what the hell happened regarding the Harry Potter world. If you bitch about it, I won’t be paying attention. If you ask questions, that’s something different, though depending on what they are, I may refuse to answer them. If you flame, I’ll either mock you or ignore you.

2. I make shit up on the fly, as usual, though I do attempt to ensure none of it conflicts too badly with known canon, or would be outright impossible (well, there is that one semi-cracked thing I did). Though, at least one event was shifted to make it fit what I was aiming for, to be used as a trigger of sorts. Of course, other events I bypassed (but if you know me at all, you were already expecting that), or altered to fit changed circumstances or my needs.

3. I have this weird feeling people are going to bitch at me that Reborn is OOC, but please try to remember, all of this starts before the events that led to the Fated Day, that event that really messed up his head and caused him to erase parts of his past. He ended up being a kind of semi-bitter, sadistic (adorable!) bulldozer in KHR canon. So, if you feel tempted to complain, don’t expect me to listen, not when way too many people out there can’t seem to understand the concept of causality or even basic psychology. The same applies to Harry. He is very unlike HP canon, but he doesn’t have the same start in life, and a lot of his resulting personality is tied up in what was done to him and what powers he commands.

4. Off-kilter focus on a lot of events, since Tsuna is never the POV character (and Renato only gets POV like, twice). I kinda really hate rehashing canon events without having anything to add to the experience, so it sticks to Harry’s POV to show off-camera events as well as semi-canon ones. But, oh god, I realized just how much of a pain the Daily Life Arc episodes are to deal with, and ended up cutting quite a number of them. Really, there’s only so much you can talk about torturing Tsuna before it gets booooring. So yeah, if Hisui wasn’t present or listening in, it happened off camera. And battles? Fuck that noise. Most of them are not lovingly detailed, because that shit is boring to me. But then I’m not a teenage boy. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

5. I have to say right now, before anybody starts reading anything, that I loathe the Future Arc and the Inheritance Arc with the fire of a thousand suns. So, in order to be able to face even trying to finish this story, I had to come up with a plan that didn’t see me flinging myself off a bridge in despair. To that end, there are three ending paths, based both on Tsuna’s choice, and on what I found amusing or fitting. I’ll do the depressing one first, I suppose. Eh, actually, the paths went wherever the hell they wanted to, it seems, so…

6. I used the manga this time, not the anime (with a minor exception or two). The anime altered too many things for my comfort (though watching Mukuro wail the tar out of Mammon was a wonderful experience). I treat Tsuna the same way I did in Kidorui—which is to say, wailing him over the head with reality frequently. If you think that means I hate the kid, you have worse problems than I do psychologically.
“You come at her from behind and bump into her, and I’ll come to the rescue and distract her from you stealing her wallet.”

“How long?”

“Should be any minute now.”

He made a disgusted sound from his perch high up in a tree and materialized an obsidian senbon, then flicked it at the taller of the two. He smirked as the guy clapped a hand over his neck and cried out in pain a second time as the senbon pierced through his hand. Hisui released the construct into nothingness and fashioned another one, flicking that at the other brat, hitting him in the upper thigh.

Within a minute the two of them had fled the area, far too invested in their own pain to prey on the local populace. Their intended target strolled by without ever realizing she had been in danger of losing her hard-earned money. Fukushima Nana was his only real friend in Namimori, one of the very few who did not give him grief for coming from an orphanage.

He jumped down from the tree and followed her to the restaurant where they both worked. He had to have a job if he intended to do more than survive on the sufferance of the orphanage, and she just liked to have spending money. He had worked his way up from dogsbody to cook through persistence and stubbornness, wanting very much to learn how to cook so that later on he could properly fend for himself and not have to rely on food stands, takeaway, or delivery.

As he ghosted up beside her she glanced over and smiled widely. “Hisui-kun!”

He nodded a greeting.

“One of these days I’m going to convince you to come help me prepare bentos for school.”

He sighed. “Your mother keeps acting like we’re a couple. I hate it.”

Nana giggled. “You’re so silly.”

He opened the door for her and ushered her inside, then split away so he could ready himself for his shift. He escorted her home hours later, mostly to make sure no one tried to prey on her. Namimori did not have much crime, but there were always thugs popping up and a yakuza “family” around, so he preferred to keep an eye on his friend.

On his way back to the orphanage, hands stuffed in his pockets as he walked, a man emerged from the shadows and hailed him. ‘What the hell?’ he thought, eyeing the fellow suspiciously.

“You have … a singular talent.”

His brow went up.

“We could use someone talented like you. That trick with the needles was good.”
Hisui shifted his weight. ‘This guy—how did he see any of that? No one’s ever noticed before. Am I getting sloppy?’

“You’re a bit young yet, but that’s all right. You obviously have a handle on your talents. I’m Daisuke. I work for a … talented family, talented as you are.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he finally replied. “I’m a cook.”

Daisuke laughed softly. “Yeah, I know that. I’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

“You some kind of pedophile?” he asked with a sneer. “Gonna offer me candy?”

The man looked briefly shocked. “Never heard that one before,” he said, shaking his head. “Look. I’ll get straight to the point. With your abilities you could be an excellent hitman. Like I said, I’ve been watching. I know the types you target. I’m offering you a chance to join our family.”

“And take orders from some stranger? No thanks.”

Daisuke furrowed his brow. “How about a compromise? I’ll give you my card, you think about it, and contact me if you want to try taking on some jobs.”

Hisui snorted softly. “I can’t imagine there are many people who need to die in a town like this.”

“No, but we’re not far from several big cities. I’m sure you make enough to cover the initial travel expenses on a first job. The pay for it would more than cover that outlay. And if you’re good, even if you don’t join the family officially, you can make a lot of money and get away from the orphanage, get your own place.”

He considered that. It was a step up from what he did already, a big step, but damn if he had not considered killing more than a few in town for just how troublesome they were overall. “What are you, yakuza?”

Daisuke shook his head. “Got nothing to do with them. Let’s just say our roots are in Italy.”

‘Mafia? In Japan?’ Could he actually make that step? Kill a person? Multiple people? It was favored odds he might have to at some point, just based on his past. Wouldn’t it be better to get all the shit out of the way beforehand, just in case? “Fine. Give me a week to think about it.”

Daisuke slid a card from his breast pocket and offered it. He took it and glanced at it briefly, then shoved it into his jacket. Daisuke walked away, and Hisui waited until he could no longer be seen before continuing on his way.

He spent a lot of time thinking about the offer, especially the part where the man had said “officially”. If he could be a kind of freelancer, and have the option to turn down jobs not to his liking—well, that would require actually meeting with him to see what he was offered. If a target did not deserve to die, he simply could not see bothering with any of it. How many people must the mafia have out there to have noticed someone like him in a place like Namimori?

A week later he met with the man at one of the parks.

“Okay, here’s a potential first job for you,” Daisuke said, taking a file from his briefcase and laying it on the picnic table.

Hisui pulled it over to him and opened it. The top sheet of paper showed a bio of the target. Amusingly enough the guy was a pedophile. He glanced up to see that Daisuke was innocently
smiling at him. He scowled and looked back down. The job was in Kobe. It would take approximately two hours to get there by train which, if he could manage to complete the job on a day off, would be fine.

The folder gave information regarding the target’s schedule and frequent haunts, and—“This doesn’t give any direction as to how,” he pointed out, looking back up.

Daisuke nodded. “The client doesn’t care. And for something like this, it’d give us a good idea of how you handle things. How clean or how messy, how well you plan, things like that. It would give us a better idea of what you’d be suited for so we’d know what else we could offer in the way of jobs in the future.”

“Right.” He glanced through the material again, then asked, “Where’s the proof?”

Daisuke smiled again, a smile that bespoke satisfaction, and pulled another folder from his case to slide over. “There’s plenty of proof, but the target has excellent lawyers and a lot of people willing to back him up and place him away from any crimes. Local law enforcement has their hands tied. The client finally turned to us for a solution.”

‘Maybe the client had a child targeted by this sick fuck,’ he thought, perusing the new folder. Eventually he said, “Fine. What’s the pay? And do I need my own proof or will news reports suffice?”

“This time? ¥500,000.”

He frowned. “That doesn’t sound like much for someone’s life.”

“It’s not, but this is a test job. A real job, but still a test for you. If you do well and you want to keep going, I can promise you the payouts would become a lot more attractive. We can even arrange for you to get an account with a family-run bank and an innocent enough job title to account for the money you’ll be earning. No sense in having the government come sniffing around, especially if you end up renting a property and become a responsible adult even at your age. As for proof, it’ll be all over the news if you succeed.”

“Fine.” He flipped through the material again, even though he had no need. His memory was perfect, always had been. Nothing escaped him unless he chose to forget it, with one particular exception. “I’ll take care of it,” he said and pushed the folders back.

“I’ll be in touch, then,” Daisuke said, returning the folders to his briefcase.

The next morning Hisui disappeared as he usually did from the orphanage and took the earliest possible train to Kobe to scope out the park the target often frequented. He did not know for certain if the man used the place to troll for potential victims, but there was some speculative evidence that he did. He perched in a likely tree and waited, carefully adjusting his position every so often to prevent cramping, and eyed the target intently even as he pretended to be reading a book. Daisuke had only mentioned his senbon, but he had more than one way to potentially kill a man. The question was whether or not to reveal that.

There was a ropeway the target occasionally rode that offered possibilities. When the target started walking that way he jumped down and found a better position, then made certain the man got on a cabin alone by messing with gravitational forces in order to keep other visitors away. Once it was closed and in motion he scaled another tree and got ready, materializing a half dozen obsidian senbon.
He sent the first toward the mechanism holding the cabin in place, using his control of gravity to ensure a true and steady flight, following that up with the rest in succession. In thirty seconds they had cracked open the mechanism and the cabin dropped free, crashing down into the waterway. Just to be certain, he ensured that the target, if he was even conscious, could not escape, and would drown if he was not already dead.

A few minutes later he was off deep in the woods of the park vomiting. It took a while for the dry heaves to let up and he sat back with a disgusted sigh. Ten minutes after that he had “cleaned up” the evidence with a micro-singularity and had made his way back to one of the paths.

That afternoon he ran into Nana on his way to work. “Hisui-kun! I was going to ask you to go shopping with me earlier, but I couldn’t find you,” she said, sounding disappointed.

“And let your mother get more ideas in her head?” he replied. “We’re fourteen, Nana-chan. Way too early for any of us to worry about that kind of thing.” His stomach was still feeling unsettled and he was not looking forward to being around so much food. “School, on the other hand, is important.”

“I still don’t know if I’m interested in university,” she almost whispered. “It’s so far off.”

He rolled his eyes slightly. “That’s no reason not to do well. You should always do your best.”

“You’re right,” she said with a nod. “So let’s get to work!”

Daisuke hailed him after work the next evening, after he had escorted Nana to her house. He was half way to the orphanage when the man emerged from the shadows again, much like the first time. Daisuke fell into step with him. “Excellently done,” he complimented. “You even made it look like an accident.”

“Yeah.”

As they left the pool of light cast by one of the street lamps Daisuke handed over an envelope. “This has the account information in it. You’ll need to go in to finalize a few details, but the money is there, along with a bonus for speedy completion. I’ll be in touch, all right?”

He took the envelope and shoved it in his pocket, nodding, and kept going as Daisuke peeled off in another direction.

Over the course of the school year he continued to improve at cooking, dodge Nana’s mother, torment the idiots in town, and take jobs. He also learned about Omertà and the Vindice. Daisuke contacted him on average once a month and his payment kept rising. Technically he was employed by a company which he did contract work for, proofreading work he could do at home, in addition to his job at the restaurant.

He made it a point to vary when he took out targets, so that no obvious pattern developed, even if it meant going to school on no sleep from time to time. The orphanage staff never bothered to check on their charges after lights out, so it was not a problem to slip away if necessary.

Hisui and Nana ended up at the same high school, and even in the same class. He was making more than enough money to afford the fees, and to have a small apartment of his own. Upper secondary school was not compulsory and the orphanage would not have paid for it, though he could have competed for a scholarship.

His parents had thrown him away like trash; he would make it on his own. Not even Nana knew his parents were still alive. She was a nice girl, a bit flighty and naïve, and while he thought he could trust her never to say anything it was best to just not mention it in the first place. Knowledge brought
on expectations, questions, and other troublesome issues.

They were sixteen when the blond showed up. Nana was acting more giggly than usual when she came back for an order and he eyed her curiously, watching as she brought the meal to one of the window tables. Sitting there was a blond man, ruggedly handsome, perhaps a few years older than they were, and Nana was all blushes.

He sighed and returned to his duties, mentally writing an essay due at the end of the week and another one due the week after. He would simply type them out after he got home and get back to learning new things, interesting things, like languages and warding. He had to have some focus for all that spare time. Every so often, usually when he was out on a contract but not always, he would stop in at the closest magical enclave to browse through the various shops. Now that he had money he could afford to actually purchase all those books and supplies he wanted rather than steal them or read in situ.

The one thing he refused to do was purchase a wand. He had been using his abilities for years before ever stumbling over one of the magical world’s shopping areas, though he realized that one set of powers was not considered magical, and would be damned if he succumbed to using a crutch. If nothing else, having access to those enclaves meant he could keep up with news around the world and see what was going on back in the United Kingdom.

“Nagao-kun! That order ready?”

He slid the omurice he had just finished cooking onto a plate and turned so he could hand it over, and moved on to the next order.

Nana was giggly on the way home and he just knew she would never make it to university. She was the type to get married fairly early and become a homemaker and mother. There was nothing wrong with that, he knew, but—‘As long as she’s happy, I guess,’ he thought as she slipped inside her house.

Things in the UK continued to be on the order of grim, but the papers kept reporting decisive victories against You-Know-Who’s forces. He rather wondered if it would come down to, in the end, a country of mundanes, what with all those deaths being screamed out as news. About the only good thing he could see was that, unless Big Evil was hiding a whole lot more minions than anyone was aware of, the “good guys” were preventing him from actually taking over. Not exactly a Mexican Standoff, but…

Daisuke fell into step with him as he walked home. “Got a new one if you’re interested.”

He gave a faint nod and kept walking. Once inside his apartment he offered the man a soft drink to be polite and sat down to look through the offered folder.

“What university are you aiming for?”

The target was a flame-user. It had not taken but a handful of jobs before Daisuke had explained a few things to him, so at least he had some kind of a name for his non-magical powers. “I’m looking at Kyoto University,” he replied, trying to figure out how to approach the hit.

“Oh? What degree?”

“Linguistics.” The target was a Sun who liked to use his flames to induce almost uncontrolled cell regeneration in his victims, giving them the equivalent of tumors that choked out their lives. Had the man been taking contracts and using it for those that would have been one thing, but this fellow was
choosing innocents and apparently killing for fun.

“Thinking ahead, I see,” Daisuke commented. “That could be highly useful.”

“I need a decent cover and translation work pays well,” he said. “You don’t usually show me jobs with so few details. Obvious? Clean? What?”

“Ah, it’s up to you. But the client seemed to favor something messy. Just a feeling I got from the way he was acting. Are you ever going to warm up to me?” Daisuke asked teasingly.

Hisui scowled. “I don’t get paid to be friendly and charming.”

Daisuke laughed. “Some day!”

He sighed in mild frustration and finished looking through the materials. ‘If the client wants messy, I can do messy.’ ‘Obvious or quiet?’

Daisuke shrugged. “He didn’t specify. Personally, I’d go with obviously messy if you can swing it. The shit the target does warrants it.”

He nodded. ‘So some people get traumatized, so what?’ “I’ll do it,” he said, pushing the folder back. “Might take me a week, though.”

“All right, then. And you might not get paid to be charming, but it can help on jobs in the future,” Daisuke said, packing up and standing. “Think about it.”

Two days later he located the target and shadowed him around Osaka, waiting for an opportune moment. The man decided to have lunch at an outside café table so Hisui held off until he was about ten minutes into his meal before strolling down the street on a route past the café.

A hundred yards beyond that point, and just before he turned the corner, he “reached” back and decompressed the guy, essentially making him explode, showering the area with blood and bone and flesh. On the way to the station he picked up a set of enameled hair slides as a gift for Nana. If she was going to go all girly on him, more so than usual, the least he could do was help her feel pretty.

“Wow,” Daisuke said a day later. “You’ve been hiding stuff from me!”

Hisui shrugged. “Why are you even here? You normally just make a transfer.”

“There’s been some outside interest in you. We’ve kept you pretty quiet because of your age, but I thought you should know. They don’t know who you are, just your reputation.”

He nodded. “Doesn’t mean shit right now. I have plenty to keep me occupied. But I’ll keep in mind that someone might actually track me down.”

“Good. Oh, and the client included a bonus.”

Nana’s blond kept showing up at the restaurant at irregular intervals and he was semi-resigned to her ending up married to the guy. There was little he could say it about it; it wasn’t like he had bothered to even meet or talk to him. There was just something about the guy’s manner that rubbed him the wrong way, even if Nana’s socks were being charmed off.

Things heated up as they went into their third year. “He’s really sweet,” Nana told him. “So charming. It’s just like being a princess at times!”

‘Kami-sama.’ “Please at least tell me he has a good job or good prospects.”
“Oh yes,” she assured him. “He works construction all over the place. And oil drilling, I think he said.”

He eyed her askance. “Nana-chan, when would you ever even see him? It’s not like he’s here every other week.”

“It is a little unfortunate,” she said, looking sad for a split second, “but I really like him. My mother likes him, too.”

“Well, that would explain why she hasn’t been bugging me of late,’ he thought. “Does this have bearing on you not getting ready for the exams in January?”

She looked down.

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you how to live your life. I’ll support your decision, even if I don’t agree. I still think you should take the exams, just to see where you stand.”

She looked up with a relieved smile and nodded. “Thank you, Hisui-kun.”

“Come on. We’ll be late if we don’t hurry. Your boy toy might even be there.”

She giggled merrily and raced on ahead.

January rolled around and he aced the national exams, then took a second set in February, that time specifically for Kyoto University. He was accepted as a student for the upcoming school year and started making plans to find a place to live there.

“How is this going to affect my job?”

“It won’t,” Daisuke assured him. “I can come to you there just as easily. As soon as you get situated just let me know where. If you want I can narrow down the prospects for you, make sure you aren’t in a bad area.”

If the man had said that back in the beginning he would have been deeply suspicious, but he knew now that as his “handler” of sorts, Daisuke was simply trying to be helpful. “Yeah. That’d save me a fair amount of time.” For all he knew he would end up in a building owned by the family, but so long as they never pushed him to officially join up, he found it hard to care. He could ward the place and keep out any electronic spies, just as he had for his current apartment.

Not long before they graduated Nana broke the news to him on the way home one evening. “He asked me to marry him.”

“You said yes.”

“I did. Will you come? We’re planning for June.”

“I’ll try, but I have no idea what my schedule will be like. I’ll get you what information I can, all right? If I can’t, well, I’ll be there in spirit.”

She gave him a grateful hug. “I’m so happy!”

He tried to smile for her. “Where are you going to live if he’s off working all over?”

“Oh! Namimori. He thinks it’s quite charming here, so he’s going to buy a house for us. I’m very excited. Just think! My own little house I can decorate and take care of, cook in…”
“Assuming you could cook,” he teased.

Nana gave him an outraged look and smacked his arm daintily. “You’re so mean to me!”

“Tch. I know, I know, your mother’s been teaching you. I’m sure you’re a wonderful cook.”

“You’d know if you ever ate one of the bentos I bring in!” she said. “But you have to be all self-sufficient and make your own. All those poor girls who keep hoping to impress you.” She sighed dramatically.

He groaned and shook his head. “They can keep hoping, not that there are as many as you seem to be implying. Fine. You can make me one for tomorrow, okay?”

Nana clapped and grinned in triumph. “I will! Oh, here’s me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded and waited until she was safely inside before turning away. ‘Well, at least the wedding gift won’t be an issue. I have more than enough money for that.’

Daisuke found him several apartments to choose from, and he spent a weekend getting that taken care of, and another weekend getting the warding worked out. All he would have to do was pack up his current apartment into one of those fancy trunks and he would be good to go.

Living in Kyoto was a serious change, as Namimori was a bit spread out in places, but still more of a smaller town. The students there, while generally very serious about their studies, did not know of his humble beginnings and therefore did not prejudge. In consequence he had a lot of girls giggling at him, and more than few young men.

His contracts moved around more, as well. Places such as Nara and Nagoya had been added to the list of possible cities, though Daisuke never gave him any for Kyoto itself. A schedule for the academic year was sent off to Nana and he received back a letter letting him know which weekend they were planning for. Barring any incidents he would be able to attend.

“This one is another flame-user,” Daisuke said as he handed over a folder and sat back with his soft drink.

He nodded and read through it. The target was a Lightning and leaned toward “hardening” the hearts of her victims, usually men who had upset her in some way, such as by spurning her advances. ‘Great.’ She was scheduled to be at some fancy hotel in Nara that coming weekend, so if he took the job he had a specific window of opportunity.

The paperwork on her noted that she haunted hotel bars, drinking a little too much while looking to score, so caution would be required. True, he could plaster himself to the ceiling and work from there, but that would be a mite ridiculous. “Yeah. I’ll do it.”

Daisuke looked oddly relieved.

Hisui arched a questioning brow.

“It’s just that you’ve never been offered a contract on a woman before. We weren’t sure if you’d accept it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Assholes are assholes. Gender means precisely nothing, except when considering a vector for approach on the hit.”

“Good. That’s good to know.” Daisuke nodded a few times.
“You could have just asked,” he pointed out. “It’s been how many years? Whatever. I’ll do it.”

Daisuke left a few minutes later and Hisui sat back to contemplate the hit. He was free on Friday—no lectures that day—so he could leave early and scope the place out, get a plan worked up.

Saturday evening found him seated at a table in the hotel bar with a glass of wine and a book. That he wasn’t quite old enough was beside the point. Magic was handy that way. It was also handy in having constructed his disguise for the evening. A potion had lengthened his hair, for one—he was so taken with the results that he was considering growing out his hair for real—and it had been bundled up in the back. A strip of embroidered jade silk around his throat took care of another issue.

In addition to that he was wearing a very pricey woman’s kimono and appropriate makeup. His androgynous looks made it easy to pass for a woman. What came across as somewhat sullen as himself was more sultry in female guise for some reason, even if he was trying to pass himself off as sweet and relatively innocent. His target teetered in on four inch heels and immediately cozied up to the bar to order, so he kept a quiet eye on her while pretending to read. Once the woman was deep enough into inebriation he would act.

He had just turned the page when someone sat at his table, causing him to look up in surprise. Seated there was a young man, perhaps his age, but clearly not Japanese, definitely European. He lowered his eyes modestly and tilted his head, letting his lips part slightly, watching the man in his peripheral vision. He had a mass of spiky black hair mostly covered by a fedora banded with yellow, very peculiar sideburns, and liquid black eyes. A sharp, obviously expensive, obviously tailored suit adorned his lean form.

“May I buy you a drink?”

Hisui glanced over for a second and lowered his eyes again. ‘Great. He’s hitting on me, isn’t he. Well, if he has a little too much he won’t be paying attention too closely.’ “Ano…” he said breathily.

“Sinclair Renato. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“…Seta Midori,” he replied, more or less off the top of his head.

Sinclair got a gleam in his eyes, one that Hisui suspected meant he had just presented a challenge of some kind. He certainly wasn’t going to giggle and fawn like many of the girls he knew—how the hell else were you supposed to act?

“Just one drink,” Sinclair coaxed. “A pretty lady like you shouldn’t be drinking alone.”

His mouth twitched as he took in the absurdity of the situation. “Just one,” he allowed, trying to keep his voice breathy, then set his book down and finished what little remained in his glass.

Sinclair signaled to the bar and a server rushed over. Shortly thereafter there were two new glasses on the table. Sinclair lifted his glass and took a sip, then gave him a charming smile. “Are you here for the convention?”

He shook his head, not having any idea what convention the man was referring to, and let his gaze flit around the room so he could update himself on his target. “I just came to see the deer. You?”

“Visiting a friend. So, you don’t live in Nara, then?”

He shook his head again, taking note that his target was on her third drink and eyeing up the prospects available. Her eyes had stopped on Sinclair, but as he was sitting with someone her gaze kept on going after a moment. “I would wonder if you grew up in this country due to your fluency,
but I can tell by your accent that you did not. And not with that name, either.”

Sinclair smiled, almost smirked. “French father, Italian mother. I get around.”

“I’ll just bet you do,” he thought. “You speak the language very well. My compliments.”

“Thank you,” Sinclair replied and eyed the untouched glass of wine.

Hisui cast a quick spell under the table, noted the results, then reached out to have a sip. “It’s not that late. I would expect if you were visiting a friend that you would be out to dinner with them.”

“Trying to get rid of me?” Sinclair teased.

“You seem to be harmless,” he replied, taking another sip. His target went for drink number four, so he smiled at the look on Sinclair’s face and caused a half dozen senbon to materialize under the table, then sent them darting off to a new location. “Of course,” he added, sending his weapons straight at the woman’s chest, “that would be relative, I suppose.”

His target let out a choked cry and collapsed to the ground. Hisui jerked his head toward the sound and let his eyes go wide with feigned surprise. “What—?” His hand flew up to hover near his mouth.

Sinclair half rose out of his seat, then relaxed back into it as hotel workers rushed in to see to the woman. Hisui released his “hold” on the senbon, allowing them to dissipate into nothingness.

“I don’t understand,” he said breathily. “What happened?”

“Looks like she may have had a little too much to drink,” Sinclair said, despite the fact that the carpet was being stained with blood.

“Oh. That’s very impolite,” he said.

Sinclair looked back at him with some amount of incredulity, then smiled. “I’m sure they’ll take care of it.”

“Yes. I have heard the staff here are very good. Do you often visit Japan?”

They made inconsequential small talk for the time it took for him to finish the glass of wine and he relaxed enough to find amusement in a man hitting on a woman who was really a man who was really only there as part of a hit. He took pleasure in coming across as being a bit brainless, pretending to an extent that he was a non-giggly Nana.

“Would you like me to escort you to your room?” Sinclair offered after he started making polite leaving noises.

Hisui smiled. “I couldn’t possibly trouble you. But I thank you very much for your kind offer. It is only a short walk for me,” he said, gracefully getting up and making sure he had his book. “I hope you have a pleasant stay in our country.”

Sinclair stood at the same time and nodded. “I had a delightful time.”

Hisui smiled again and bowed, then walked away.

Renato watched as the very attractive lady left, feeling a bit chagrined that his charm had not actually managed to secure him a companion for the night, then blinked and shook his head slightly. ‘Women
don’t usually walk like that,’ he thought, then followed, wanting to see where she went. He quietly
turned the same corner she had and stopped dead; she was nowhere to be seen.

There was a bank of elevators, but none of them were anywhere close to the ground floor, and he
had not heard the characteristic sound of one of them arriving. Where had she gone? Was she even a
she? That ribbon around her neck might simply have been decoration, or it might have been part of a
disguise. ‘Damn it. Was I really taken in by cross-dresser?’ he thought as he leaned against the wall
in contemplation. Not that it would matter much if he had, because he would go for anything that
looked that good. He was still annoyed that he had struck out. That almost never happened, damn it.

Still, it was more than a little odd, now that he thought about it. He headed off toward his room, his
mind wandering back over the events of the evening. Maybe he was creating equations where there
were none, but who was the hitman? His insects had brought back word of a hit going down that
evening and he’d wanted to watch. He had heard a lot about the so-called Kokuyoseki Hari, who
often, but not always, used his or her signature attack on jobs.

But who? His view of the room had been hampered by his position; his fault for seeing a pretty
young thing sitting there alone. He waited until it was early morning and slipped into the hotel
security office, easily sliding past the worker there, and checked the feeds for the bar. As an
afterthought he checked the hallway and lobby feeds, but the lady had walked into a blind spot and
somehow never appeared again. Not one person in the bar had been in a position to have done the
job. Unless—?

He slipped back out and returned to his room. He had heard once, rumors of something other than
Flames of the Sky. Flames of the Earth, with perhaps only one overlapping ability, though he knew
so little it was difficult to say. Research was in order. And maybe some investigation into the hotel
staff, just in case. The night shift security officer looked dodgy.

He sat a bit uncomfortably, wondering what in hell was taking so damn long, then straightened up
when a side door opened. Sawada strode into the room and took his place, but Hisui was about as
close to goggling as he had ever come at the way the man was dressed. Nana came floating in thirty
seconds later, not seeming to notice or even care that her soon-to-be husband was dressed in heavy
orange trousers, boots, wife beater, an orange work shirt tied around his waist, and wearing a hard
hat.

Nana, on the other hand, looked lovely.

He escaped the reception as soon as it was feasible, after having spoken to Nana and given
somewhat strained congratulations. “I wish I could stay longer,” he lied, “but university is pretty
intense.”

“I’m just so glad you could make it! Thank you so much. Write me.”

He gave her a careful hug and escaped before the new husband could get close enough to delay his
departure. He was on the next train out.

Daisuke stopped by with a six-pack of beer a couple of weeks later, which occasioned a raised brow
from Hisui. “Why are you bringing me alcohol?”

His handler shrugged. “Well, I got curious, so I did some checking. Did you know that Sawada
Iemitsu is part of the Vongola Famiglia?”
“…What?” His friend had married a mafioso?

Daisuke cracked open a beer and handed it over. “Yeah. Surprised me, too. Not quite sure how I missed that.”

He took a sip and immediately set the thing down in favor of a soft drink from his refrigerator. Daisuke shrugged and pulled it closer.

“Well. Okay. I’ll just hope that her husband keeps his damn mouth shut about what his job really entails. He better fucking take care of her.”

Daisuke tilted his head and extracted a folder from his briefcase. “You are such a big brother.”

He snorted and flipped the folder open. ‘Lovely, a rapist with a rich daddy. And the client is a rich daddy with a traumatized daughter. Tempting to decompress his family jewels, but this is for a hit, not a strong warning. Then again, that would be an inventive way to bleed out.’

“You going anywhere for your break?”

“I could afford to,” he replied. “Hadn’t really thought about it. Why?”

“So you could consider the idea of eventually taking on jobs outside of Japan. Or at least becoming familiar with other cities in Japan a bit farther out than your usual. You’re good, and a wider range in the end is a bonus for everyone.”

He grunted and flipped to the next page. “I suppose. I’m going to be here for at least four years, though, so it’s not as if I have to get right on that. Maybe I’ll go to Tokyo for a visit. Or Hiroshima. Get me a list at some point with possibilities.”

Daisuke nodded. “And this?”

He closed the folder and pushed it back. “Yeah, I’ll do it.”

‘The fuck is he doing here?’ he wondered on spotting Sinclair several days later. He adjusted his sunglasses and stepped forward to order some gyūdon from the street vendor. A minute later he was seated on a bench and tucking in, his head tilted slightly as he “listened” to the tracker he had on the target.

“That any good?” he heard, and lifted his head to see Sinclair looking at him questioningly.

He shrugged. “It’s fine. Not as good as mine, but it’s fine.”

Sinclair nodded and walked off, only to return a couple of minutes later to sit down next to him with a bowl of his own. After a few bites he said, “Not bad. Not great, either. You’re a cook?”

“I was,” he replied, not seeing any harm in admitting that. “How about you? Secretly a reporter for a food magazine and taking mental notes for your next column?”

Sinclair chuckled. “Ah, no. Just a tourist.”

“If you’re here at night you can see the tower lit up at the port. And Chinatown’s pretty interesting.” He tilted his head again, “listening”; his target was getting closer. It was all kinds of strange that he had run into the same man again while on a job, but it was probably coincidence.

“With the number of Chinatowns in the world a person has to wonder if China would be disappointing in comparison,” Sinclair said.
He snorted in amusement as his target finally rounded a corner and came into view. Hisui had another bite of his beef bowl before saying, “Maybe someday I’ll go find out.” He wanted to add some doubt to the death, so when the target paused to peer into one of the shop windows Hisui reached out to alternately compress and decompress the man’s heart. With any luck the medical sorts would mistake it for a heart attack, and if not, it wasn’t as though there was any physical evidence.

He pretended not to notice that a man had just died and finished up his meal, then tossed his trash in a nearby bin. “You might consider the Nunobiki Herb Garden,” he said as he got up. “But, well, any hotel probably has all the usual brochures.” He shrugged again.

Sinclair nodded. “Thanks.”

He refrained from any jobs during his summer vacation, choosing to take Daisuke’s suggestion and visit Tokyo. He played tourist himself for several weeks, getting a feel for the city. He considered visiting Nana in Namimori, but she had not been married for all that long and he felt it would be intrusive, and that was assuming she was even in Namimori at the moment.

Instead he bypassed it and checked out Hiroshima instead, eventually ending up back at his apartment to go over a list Daisuke had mailed him regarding possible locations of interest. He was not, in point of fact, all that interested in leaving Japan for any length of time, though he supposed he would have to at least visit Italy at some point.

If you were mafia you had a base in Italy; that was the rule. Daisuke might be Japanese and live and work in Japan, but the famiglia he belonged to, Biforcuto, had its primary base in Italy. The next job Daisuke had for offer he turned down because he had a cold and was not about to sneeze his way through a hit or have to duck off into a restroom multiple times to blow his nose.

Not long after that Nana sent him a chatty letter and invited him to visit, so he took some time to go to Namimori. She met him at the station and they walked to her new house together. “It’s a darling little place,” she said happily. “But how is university? Are the people there nice?”

“It’s fine. It’s still just school, though with a more narrow and intense focus. It’s not any more exciting than our schools were. Years to go, so don’t start making plans just yet for my graduation.”

“I have a dress already picked out!” she assured him, then grinned, her way of saying she knew he would succeed.

The house was typical enough, inside and out, but there was plenty of room for a family. “It’s nice,” he told her. “Not a whole lot different from your parents’ house, but I can see where you’ve already begun making inroads on putting your stamp on things.”

Nana smiled and pushed him toward a seat in the kitchen. “Now, you’re going to sit there and let me make you lunch! And you’ll smile at me and make happy noises and tell me how good it is.”

He chuckled. “Sure.” As she worked he told her about some of his classes, the quirks that some of the staff had, and how much enjoyment he got out of working with languages. The bowls she placed on the table contained gyūdon, amusingly enough. He made a show of looking wary before giving it a try, then smiled. “Very good, Nana-chan. I’m impressed.”

She beamed at him. “I knew you’d like it!”

“Maybe you should have been the cook at the restaurant, but then I wouldn’t have had a job.”

She giggled prettily. “So what kind of place are you living in now?”
“Just an apartment, but it’s a nice enough area of the city. It’s kind of a mess with all the books I have scattered around, but I’m slowly personalizing the place. I visited Tokyo over the break and found a few things to display so it doesn’t look so bare. I just have to not get too much, because I plan to buy a house at some point and don’t want to have to transport too much in the end.”

“Oh? Where?”

“Probably here. I mean, there are a lot of memories I’m not fond of, but my best friend lives in Namimori. You may have met her.”

She giggled again.

“So even if I’m traveling around I’d still have a place to call home.”

“I would think that translation work is something you could do from home,” she commented.

He shrugged. “Depends? What if someone has an old book they want translated? It might be too fragile or valuable to ship over, and photocopies of the pages might blur some of it. But that’s a ways away. The jobs I do now on the side aren’t quite so fussy, but they pay the bills, and get me valuable experience. You never said where you went for your honeymoon,” he pointed out.

“Oh, didn’t I? I guess I was too excited,” she replied, looking a bit chagrined. “We went to Italy! I even got to meet Iemitsu’s grandfather. What a nice man! And he had such presence.”

‘Grandfather? In Italy? Tch.’ “That’s good. How was Italy? I was considering visiting there myself at some point. I’ve heard the food is wonderful.”

She chattered away about the places she’d seen, even through washing up and the two of them heading out to wander the shopping district. He had to admit, it did sound like a nice country; maybe next year. He returned home at least assured that his friend was happy, and got back to work.

‘Another flame-user,’ he thought, looking through the folder Daisuke provided. ‘I swear, Suns can get a little too smug about their abilities.’ The bio presented a fellow who liked to stimulate a victim’s muscles to the point that they lost motor function and were easy prey for things like passing cars or falling into a river to drown.

In this case it was a petty thug type who had lucked into activating his flames and was childishly exploring what he could do without ever once considering the consequences. The only reason he had been noticed was that he was too often noticeably in the vicinity of his victims and stuck to the same place.

That made him pause a little. He had been found that way, except that he had not been killing people, only giving them a little payback and preventing his targets from preying on others. He was in the vicinity when he made a hit, but considering now he was all over the place and not working only in a single town or city...

“I am slightly leery of this one,” he said.

“Because it’s a minor?”

“Yeah. But I see here that he was approached and refused the offer, and keeps on with his killing spree. Would you have arranged my death if I had refused?”

Daisuke shrugged. “Very possibly, yes. The flame-aware famiglie don’t like having flame-users running around without at least some connection to one of them. But you didn’t refuse, and here we
are.”

He grunted and finished reading the material. No sense worrying about that now, but it did make him wonder if there was a retirement plan in the mafia. “Fine. I’ll take care of it.”

He spent the evening in Yasu scoping the area out and making plans, then apparated home and managed to get at least some sleep before classes. The next evening he returned and shadowed the target to his home. Once things quieted down and the household was asleep for the night he floated up to the boy’s bedroom window. He carefully “reached” out to manipulate the lock for it, opened the window, then materialized his usual senbon and sent them flying. The forehead, both eyes, the throat, and two at his heart. As soon as he was sure the kid was dead he released his weapons and floated away swiftly, then disapparated.

His next visit to a magical enclave brought news from Britain, though none of it differed much from previous reports. Both sides were still engaging in clashes and the body count kept piling up. He was honestly surprised that anyone was left alive, and the papers did not say just how many people had fled to live in other countries, nor did they go into any kind of breakdown of how many mundane-borns had been terminated.

A passing glance into one of the shop windows saw him stop; there was the cutest little kneazel kitten in there, staring at him. It opened its mouth, obviously making some kind of sound at him, even if he could not hear it, and pressed a paw up against the glass. He made the split-second decision to go inside and inquire. An hour later he had a license in his hand—who knew one was required for a purebred kneazel?—and all of the related supplies. He hated the idea that his name was registered anywhere, but…

“How do you feel about the name Yori?” he asked the kitten back at the apartment.

It eyed him for a bit, then mewed and started washing a paw.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, and set about getting everything in place. Yori was an intelligent little sucker, though he was a bit stand-offish around Daisuke. Not hostile, though. During one of those visits he said, “Can you bring a gun at some point?”

Daisuke goggled at him. “What for?”

“I want to take it apart and see how it works. I can make a number of things already, but I’m curious to see if I can make a functioning gun.”

Daisuke frowned thoughtfully. “Well… All right, I’ll ask. It would be potentially very useful to be able to produce a temporary gun. If the higher-ups say yes, I’ll bring one along and teach you myself. Same with the magazine and bullets, though I expect you’d handle that a bit differently.”

He nodded. “I have no idea if it’s even possible, but I’d like to try.”

“All right. Got a new one for you, obviously.” Daisuke pushed over a folder.

He sneered in distaste barely a minute into reading. The target was a fairly well known actor who liked to “convince” girls on the set to have sex with him. That was bad enough. The problem was that it had been determined that the target had a certain incurable disease and had inflicted it on at least one of those girls.

Hisui sat back to think about it. It would be hypocritical to refuse on the basis of the target not having actively killed someone. After all, his original job had been to assassinate a pedophile, and he had also taken out a rapist. “And they want this done on the set.”
Daisuke nodded. “They’re supposed to be filming an action scene soon, out on the street, so at least it’d be easier to get into position.”

He drummed his fingers on his thigh for a bit before nodding. “Consider it done.”

His handler pulled another folder out and flipped through the contents, then passed a sheet to him.

It was a map of the area in question, showing him exactly where he would need to focus on, with markings showing the projected filming path. “Is there any data on how many takes on average they do for a scene?”

Daisuke rifled through his folder again and said, “At least five, usually more.”

So he had a bit of leeway. He nodded and returned the map. “Fine. Ask about the gun.”

He practiced a bit, being disillusioned, while hovering, while materializing senbon, and while moving himself and them around. Gods forbid he do something asinine like fall out of the sky while trying to complete a job. When the time came he joined the crowd that was milling around in the hopes of getting a good show, and did a double-take on seeing Sinclair.

‘Okay, this is getting ridiculous. Once is nothing, twice could be coincidence, but three times? Kami-sama, do I need to take out a hit on the guy?’ He shook his head and milled until the film crew was ready and the actors were in place, then wandered off so he could get into place himself. He wanted to watch at least one take before acting, so he had an idea of the flow.

He ended up standing on a narrow ledge two stories up, disillusioned, and intently watching. When the second take started he materialized his usual half dozen senbon and sent them flying. Forehead, eyes, throat, and heart. The moment they were released he created another senbon and sent it at Sinclair, making a perfect hole through the crown of the man’s hat.

Sinclair frowned faintly at the disturbance and removed his hat to examine it, then frowned for real and started scanning the area casually. Hisui did not stick around; he flew off to a safe enough spot and disapparated home. After greeting Yori he picked up the phone and called Daisuke to ask him to come over.

Once the man arrived and was set up with a drink he asked, “Do you know the name Sinclair? Renato?”

Daisuke blinked at him a few times. “Yes, actually. He’s kind of neck and neck with you, potentially, for being one of the best hitmen in the mafia. Why?”

“Apparently he’s stalking me. I’ve run into him three times now, every time while on a job. For all I know he’s been in the vicinity on other jobs and I just didn’t notice him.”

Daisuke frowned thoughtfully. “When did you first meet him?”

“Nara. I was disguised as a woman and he tried hitting on me. I think he was looking for a bed partner.”

His handler laughed. “Oh… You probably make for a very pretty girl, too,” he said, ignoring Hisui’s scowl. “He obviously made some kind of connection, since I expect you made the hit while he was there. Maybe he wanted to eye up the competition, or admire a fellow hitman’s work?”

“Yeah, well, I was annoyed enough this time to send a senbon through his damn hat. Is he in any way connected to——” He paged through his memory. “To whoever it was sniffing around a while
Daisuke shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. And Sinclair isn’t formally part of a famiglia. He’s like you, but with contacts for more than just one.”

“He wears a lot of yellow. He a Sun?”

“Yes. He doesn’t seem to use his flames for jobs, though. He uses a gun. He also gets around, though from what you’re saying, he’s been roaming around Japan for a while. Maybe he’s on an extended holiday? I can check, see what I can find out.”

“I wish you would. I find it very odd that he keeps popping up. How is he finding out where I’ll be? Is someone in the famiglia selling information on the side? Because I thought you were still keeping me fairly under wraps.”

“We are,” Daisuke assured him. “There have been potential jobs offered to us from other famiglie who don’t operate in Japan, but who have a client who needs a hit done here; but we don’t offer any of those to you. Too much of a chance that one of their agents would be lurking, trying to get a fix on you so they can bypass us and contact you directly. Or potentially to kill you, to remove an asset.”

He paused. “Yeah, I’ll be doing some checking. If that’s what he’s up to, well… That and as you said, how he’s learning where you’ll be in the first place.”

Hisui frowned in annoyance. “Don’t offer me any jobs in the interim, while you check. It’s better if I lay low for a bit.”

Daisuke nodded. “I agree. I’ll get back to you, all right? Hopefully it won’t take too long. Call me if you need anything.”

He nodded and sat back as his handler took off. Not having jobs for a while was no big deal, it was more the aggravation of having a stalker and not knowing why. He got up and headed out to do his shopping.

A month later he got a letter from Nana, inviting him for another visit, so he took a train to Namimori that weekend. Iemitsu was off on another job, apparently, so at least he did not have to worry about bumping into the guy. Nana made lunch for them, then said, after sitting down, “We’re going to have a little addition to the family!”

He paused mid-chew and stared. ‘Yeah, right, married couples do that sort of thing.’ After swallowing he said, “I’m happy for you. When?”

She frowned faintly at his lack of enthusiasm. “Probably in October. I’m really looking forward to it!”

What he wanted to do was ask snide questions about the availability of her husband during all this, but had to assume that Nana’s mother would be useful in that capacity. “Well, hopefully this little bundle of joy will look like you. What are you hoping for? Boy? Girl? Kittens?”

She giggled at him. “You’re so silly. I’ll be happy either way. Well, not kittens,” she clarified. “If it’s a boy, though, he’ll be named in the tradition of Iemitsu’s family. For a girl? I’m not sure yet.”

“Tradition?”

Nana nodded. “Oh yes, all the boys are named after Tokugawa Shoguns. I’m not quite sure why, though, but I suppose that doesn’t matter. It’s tradition!”
‘Right.’ “This is very good, by the way,” he said.

“Oh, thank you!” She beamed at him. “What about you? I know you’re busy with university, but have you met anyone nice?”

He shook his head. “Just the usual. I’m there to learn, not get distracted.”

“But you’re such a wonderful person, Hisui-kun! I want you to be happy.”

His brow went up. “It’ll happen when it happens. I’m not worried about it. And I’m happy already. I even bought a cat,” he said to reassure her.

Her eyes went wide. “Really? Aw, that’s so sweet. What did you name it? Is it a boy or a girl?”

He carried them through the remainder of the meal with anecdotes regarding Yori, and afterward they browsed the shopping district, more as general exercise than for any actual need to shop. She still seemed to have no clue what her husband did for a living, so he was pleased. Or, if she did, she was exceptionally good at hiding it. He leaned toward the former, though. Nana could keep a secret, but she was just not particularly secretive, and she had an amazing capacity to ignore or dismiss the obvious at times.

Yori was pleased to see him again and pointedly indicated his dish after a greeting.

“You’re not starving to death just because you can see the bottom of the bowl,” he muttered. “There’s still plenty of food in there. Once a day, damn it. It’s not my fault if you don’t pace yourself.”

Yori made an unhappy sound and stalked off, only to do an about-face and go sniff around at the front door.

He eyed his cat curiously, wondering if there was someone lingering outside. He was not foolish enough to actually use the peephole. It did make him consider planting a camera out there, or in place of the peephole itself. He shooed Yori away from the door, prepared some senbon, and opened it.

Not a damn thing was out there aside from some insects buzzing around. He swiftly scanned around, then retreated and secured the door. “What the hell?” he muttered.
“Can’t find a lick of evidence that anyone is leaking information,” Daisuke informed him. “No clue how he’s finding you, but from what I’ve chased down … I think he’s curious about you. I don’t think he’s out to cause trouble so much as simply learn more about you.”

Hisui sighed. “Fine. Got anything for me?”

Daisuke brought out a folder and pushed it over. “An odd one, this. A doctor abusing his patients.”

“Sexual?” he asked, preparing to read.

“No. Unnecessary treatments. He’s an oncologist and he’s been handing out chemotherapy like it was Pocky.”

His brow went up. “Odd way for a god complex to come out,” he commented, then opened the folder. The client was one of the victims; she had gone for a second opinion elsewhere, having become uneasy and suspicious. She wanted something messy, if possible in the man’s office, but it was not a requirement. “Yeah. I’ll do it. Any news about the gun?”

“Yes, actually,” Daisuke said, reaching into his briefcase again. He brought out a handgun and laid it on the table between them. “A CZ 75. Czech Republic. Pretty popular gun choice. If you can’t get a feel with this one I can try bringing in a Beretta 92S another time.” He reached into the briefcase again and retrieved a dozen magazines. “Plastic bullets, which aren’t too difficult to get. If you can successfully make a gun, these will allow you to at least test it. And if you can reliably create one, then we can move on to the idea of you managing magazines of a sort.”

Hisui nodded.

They spent the next several hours going over the gun. Hisui learned how to take it apart and put it back together, how everything inside it worked, how the bullets were moved from the magazine to the chamber, and how they were ejected as projectiles.

Eventually he sat back and nodded. “I’ll work on it. I can keep the magazines for now?”

“Of course. It’s not like you can visit a shooting range without it being a bit troublesome, so you’d have to find someplace quiet out in the woods somewhere, or let me escort you to one of the famiglia’s ranges.”

“I’ll find my own spot,” he said. He could find a place, ward it if necessary, and so forth.

“Okay, but let me know if you change your mind on that point. How’s school going?”

“Fine. Though I’d prefer to speed things up. These people go at mizuame speed.”

Daisuke shrugged. “It is what it is. They may have won placement at such a prestigious university, but that doesn’t mean they all have brains like yours.”

“Yeah, yeah.” After his handler left he stepped out onto the balcony to have a cigarette. It was a shit habit and he had to regularly spell the clinging scent away so that he did not end up smelling like a stale ashtray, but they gave him a sense of calm that even Occlumency failed at. It probably had
something to do with the restriction of oxygen to the brain. He almost didn’t notice the chameleon clinging to the railing because of how it blended in so well.

“What are you doing, little one?” he asked it after exhaling a stream of smoke. “The middle of a city seems an odd place for you. Did you escape your owner?”

It blinked lazily at him, then eyed Yori, who had come out to investigate. His kneazle chirred curiously at the little beast, going up on his hind legs so he could sniff at the intruder. Hisui watched them carefully as he smoked, ready to intervene if Yori tried to eat the thing. It took an entire cigarette for Yori to make a satisfied little noise and sit back.

“You two friends now?” he inquired. “Or are you just satisfied that this little fellow isn’t a threat?”

Yori sneezed and wandered back inside.

“Right.” He lit up a second cigarette and leaned on the railing, staring out over the city. He would have to investigate the target’s office, of course. See if it was possible to get in there undetected, without leaving any evidence. On the other hand, if there was a nice big window? It depended on whether or not it was impact resistant, laminated…

“Suppose I could just—tch.” The client wanted messy; why was he even worrying about getting senbon through a damn window? He rolled his eyes and took a last drag, then stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray. “Later, little one.”

‘A time turner would be handy,’ he thought, eyeing the target through a pair of binoculars from the balcony of the building across the way. ‘It sucks to have to miss my lunch to do this. I wonder how hard it would be to steal one? Or construct one?’

Once the target’s aide left the office he reached out and explosively decompressed the guy. The aide ran back in, her hands went up to cover what he presumed was a scream, and then she fainted. Hisui tucked the binoculars away and went inside the building, entered a handy storage closet, and disapparated.

That evening he looked up in surprise when someone knocked at his door, three lazy ones. Yori perked up in a way that told him it was not Daisuke. He cautiously readied senbon and went to the door, then opened it. “The hell are you doing here?”

Sinclair smiled charmingly. “Going to invite me in? After all, you owe me a hat.”

He flicked his gaze up for a split second, taking in the chameleon on the guy’s hat. ‘What. The. Fuck?’ “Fine. You can come in.” He stepped back to allow passage, noting that Sinclair noted the senbon hovering there, and closed the door once the man was inside. “Never expected to gain my very own stalker,” he drawled.

Sinclair turned and smiled again. “You’re intriguing.”

“Kami-sama,” he muttered. “And no, I don’t owe you a hat. It’s your own damn fault.”

“I just wanted to see some live-action filming,” Sinclair said innocently.

Hisui snorted. “Why are you stalking me?” he asked irritably.

“Because you didn’t walk like a woman. Your disguise was fantastic and certainly had me fooled,
until you walked away. And then I started wondering.”

He snorted again. “You mean you were annoyed you didn’t get laid that night.”

Sinclair grinned. “That, too.”

“Yeah, well, I’m obviously not a woman.”

Sinclair shrugged. “So? What’s that got to do with anything?”

He sighed.

“Got anything to drink?”

“Shit.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t keep alcohol on hand. So okay, fine, I walked wrong. Why are you—?”

“I told you. You’re intriguing. You’re as good as I am. Coffee would be great. Or a soft drink.”

‘He’s like a fucking leech,’ he thought in disbelief, running a hand through his hair. He turned abruptly and walked into his little kitchen to retrieve soda from the refrigerator. Sinclair followed him in and took a seat at the table, so Hisui joined him and pushed one over. “Well, congratulations. You’re one of the very few who knows who the hell I am.”

“I’m just that good,” Sinclair said smugly as he cracked the tab on the can, continuing to ignore the senbon that followed him around.

Yori pranced in and leaped up onto the table. He sat down and eyed Sinclair.

‘Kneazles are supposed to be excellent judges of character,’ he reminded himself. ‘So either this guy is all right, or my cat is defective.’ “Yori?”

Yori looked at him, mewed in a friendly sort of way, and turned to eye the chameleon.

“Right.” He released the senbon and cracked open his soda. “I have the weird feeling you can communicate with that little guy.”

Sinclair smiled and removed his hat, placing it on the table. The chameleon scrambled off and wandered over to Yori.

“I almost put out a hit on you.”

Sinclair’s eyes went wide. “A little harsh, don’t you think?”

“How was I supposed to know what the hell you were planning? After the third time I saw you I started asking questions.”

Sinclair chuckled and took a long sip from his can. “It was chance I sat with you the second time, but at least after that I had some idea what to be on the look out for. It’s the eyes, you know. They’re very distinctive. People are calling you the Obsidian Needle, or Phantom.”

He shook his head in disgust. “That’s pathetic. The first sounds like a damn superhero from one of those American comics. The second one is at least tolerable, even if I think it’s stupid.”

“So. University student, linguistics, been a hitman for…?”
“Oh, now, that’ll cost you,” he replied.

“Well, let’s see. What can I get for an amazing evening where I make you scream my name in ecstasy, repeatedly?”

Hisui stared. “Senbon to the family jewels. I am no one’s momentary amusement.”

Sinclair adopted a look of mock dismay. “Yes, I can speak to my chameleon.”

“Any idiot can speak to it,” he replied.

“We can communicate,” Sinclair clarified. “He told me all about your smoking habit and how he made friends with your very odd-looking cat.”

Yori growled at the comment.

“Since I was fourteen.”

Sinclair whistled. “Not bad. Gonna make a wild guess and say you’re self taught.”

He shrugged.

“After all, you’re not an official part of any famiglia from what I can tell. That means it’s extremely likely you developed on your own, and were scouted because of it, after someone witnessed you in action.”

“You’re not an official part of any famiglia from what I can tell,” he replied. “You’re a Sun, but you don’t use your flames for hits, not directly, anyway. Why are you even in Japan?”

“Originally? For a holiday. But then I saw this amazingly pretty lady in a hotel bar.”

He snorted and looked at Yori. “You might want to head into the other room. I’m going to light up.”

Yori sneezed and leaped down to the floor as Hisui reached out to float a pack, lighter, and ashtray to the kitchen table. He lit a cigarette and took a drag, offering the pack to Sinclair as an afterthought. Sinclair took one and lit up with practiced ease. The chameleon scurried over to rest on the fedora again.

After a few soothing drags he said, “So, does this mean you’ll stop stalking me now?”

Sinclair exhaled a stream of smoke, then smiled. “We’re friends now, so it doesn’t count as stalking.”

“The hell?”

“You’re too pretty to let get away.”

Hisui materialized a senbon and brought it to a hover in front of Sinclair’s left eye. “Maybe I should help you out with a little eye surgery, because I’m not pretty.”

Sinclair just smiled. “Exquisitely handsome, then,” he replied, then had another drag.

“Tch.” He released the senbon. “You don’t scare easy, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, I was in a right panic the first few times I did a hit,” Sinclair said with a chuckle. “Scared to death I’d be caught and spend the rest of my tender youth in prison. I got over it. I know you’re an Earth, which is pretty damn rare, but I don’t think that’s all you are.”
He sighed.

“I got my hands on a few autopsy reports.”

“Well aren’t you a sneaky little devil,” he drawled.

“I’m very good with my hands, yes,” Sinclair replied, smirking. “And I’ve watched you manipulate gravitational forces like they were the strings of a master puppeteer. I think you’re also—what was it called? Volcano. Something like that. One paper said Seamount. It’s not easy getting information about Flames of the Earth. But it would explain the senbon that melt away to nothing. Can you do fire attacks, as well? Magma?”

He took a long drag off his cigarette. “Don’t have a clue. Never tried it. Why not use your flames for hits?”

“I am very fond of my gun,” Sinclair replied, with a little upward flirt of his eyebrows.

“…Is everything an innuendo to you?”

“That you recognized it as one says something about you,” Sinclair said smugly.

“Yeah, that I was forced to listen to way too many guys at school giggling in the locker rooms about ‘naughty’ things.” He was annoyed to realize that he was relaxing again. Sinclair was way too damn charming for his peace of mind. “Why a chameleon?”

“Ah, it’s my turn.” Sinclair stubbed out his cigarette and sat back. “Why not a gun instead of flames?”

“Because I only just recently got to strip one down to see how they work.”

Sinclair furrowed his brow in mild confusion. “I like chameleons for their ability to blend in, and I always name them Leon as a joke. They never seem to mind. You seeing anyone?”

He exhaled heavily. “No. I’ve never been all that interested in relationships.”

Sinclair’s brow went up slowly. “Hm. Another wild guess here, but based on your general manner, that default sullen expression, I’ll say that you got a lot of grief growing up and ended up being something of a loner, and more or less adverse to giving anyone the chance to hurt you.”

“What are you, a psychologist?”

Sinclair smirked. “Ha, I tricked you into a question. No, I earned a master’s degree in mathematics, actually. Why strip a gun down to see how it works if all you need to do is point and shoot? Accounting for wind, drop ratio, and other such factors.”

He took a last drag and stubbed out his cigarette, then lit another. He was further annoyed to realize he was too close to actually smiling. “I can make more than just senbon. What exactly do you expect to get out of this … meeting?”

Sinclair smiled broadly. “Getting to know my new friend better! What other reason could there be?”

How could he respond to that without opening himself for—or he could just treat it as rhetorical. But that would mean giving up an existing question. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe some bizarre satisfaction in needling me.”

Sinclair laughed.
“Why aren’t you part of a famiglia?”

“I could ask the same,” Sinclair replied. “But I think I already know why. As for me, well, I like my freedom, and I’ve yet to meet a Sky strong enough or interesting enough for me to even consider harmonizing with and becoming a guardian for.”

Now that was something he had no real knowledge of. He had never bothered to ask beyond the basic capabilities of users of Flames of the Sky.

“You really are mostly self taught,” Sinclair commented, his face serious. “Would you like to know more? I don’t mind explaining any of it.”

“Fine.”

Sinclair smiled again, but more naturally, with no inherent provocation. “Okay, it’s like this. There are seven Flames of the Sky. Sky is the center. Arrayed around that are the other six. Cloud, Lightning, Mist, Rain, Storm, and Sun. A Sky will usually, but not always, have six guardians, one of each flame. The base characteristic of Sky Flames is harmony. It represents a state of balance. The guardians plus the Sky are a part of that balance.

“Skies are the rarest. Well, I expect given just how little information there is regarding Flames of the Earth, you’re pretty damn rare, too, probably even more rare, but that’s a whole different kettle of fish. Skies can do more than just harmonize, of course, but for the purposes of my earlier answer…

“I’ve never met one I felt drawn to, so I remain a free agent, like you are. On top of that, Skies are rare enough that the idea of every flame-user out there being able to find one to harmonize with is patently ridiculous. I know of one famiglia based on Flames of the Earth, but they’re reclusive and very little is known about them.”

That, while not being all inclusive, was a good answer. “How the hell have you been able to keep tracking me down?” He had a hard time believing that the man had an army of chameleons canvassing the country.

Sinclair started to object, then seemed to realize he had asked the last question, even if he had also answered it. “The answer to that would require a whole lot of trust between us.”

He pursed his lips trying to think of a different question. Yori pranced by the archway, which jogged his memory. Yori had indicated interest in the front door that one time; nothing had been there but some insects. He finished his cigarette and gave Sinclair a speculative look. “I think I already know the answer to that, actually, so I’ll think of a different question.”

“Hm, I wonder…” Sinclair said noncommittally.

“How can you afford to keep stalking me?”

Sinclair smiled. “I have plenty of money. I can afford a lot of things.”

He sighed. More fool he for asking such an ambiguous question.

“Will you go out on a date with me?”

His brow shot up in disbelief. The guy did not quit.

“You said you took apart a gun to see how it worked, and that you can make more than senbon. The logical conclusion is that you plan to try to make a gun the same way you do your senbon. So, we go
have a picnic in some out of the way place—I know plenty, even here in Japan—and you can try, and I can tell you if any guns you come up with even handle right, never mind fire.”

That … made sense. “Will you keep your hands to yourself?”

Sinclair smirked. “Mostly.”

“Kami-sama,” he muttered, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Fine.”

Sinclair smiled with what seemed genuine enthusiasm. “Favoloso! If you’re free this weekend, say, Saturday…”

“Fine.”

“I’ll even let you choose what kind of food I bring,” Sinclair offered.

“I don’t think so. I’ll do the cooking.”

“You make it sound like you don’t trust me,” Sinclair complained, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

“I can’t believe I agreed to this,” he muttered.

“I’m just that good,” Sinclair said smugly, making him half tempted to smack that smile off the man’s face.

“Whatever. Ten o’clock.”

Sinclair nodded. “Well, I should probably go. I did drop by unexpectedly, after all.” He got up. “I very much look forward to Saturday.”

He gave the man a flat look, but got up to escort him out, ridiculously grateful Sinclair did not try to sneak a good-bye kiss or something equally outrageous.

He was distracted for the remainder of the week, which annoyed him, but he shopped on Friday afternoon with a picnic in mind, which meant bentos.

‘This better be worth it,’ he snarled mentally, staring at the bento boxes. He had included rice, tamagoyaki, yakitori, mixed steamed vegetables, and seedless grapes in each. There were two small thermoses of miso soup that could sipped from directly. The damn boxes even had their own holders for hashi. He strapped everything together, including some juice bottles, and shoved the magazines Daisuke had given him into a pocket, and sat down for a cigarette. He had almost finished it when he heard three lazy knocks at the front door, so he stubbed it out and went to answer it, setting their lunch on the entry table.

Sinclair was there, smiling that charming smile. “Ciao.”

He frowned. “Hold on a minute,” he said, and turned away so he could put on his shoes. Once he was done he checked to make sure he had his keys, grabbed the bentos, and exited, closing and locking the door behind him.

Sinclair had an actual car, which rather stunned him, but he tried to take it in stride. The journey was fairly quiet, possibly because Sinclair might not have been all that accustomed to driving in the Kyoto area, but they arrived without incident at an isolated little parking area.

“It’s not a long walk,” Sinclair said once they had exited the car, “and there’s a natural enough little
area there where we can eat.” He took a few steps, paused for Hisui to begin following, and started walking again. About fifteen minutes later the trees thinned out to reveal a clearing. There were a few targets along one side and near the entrance was a set of flat rocks around a tree stump.

Hisui set the bentos on the stump and chose one of the rocks to sit on. “I’ve never done this before, so…”

“Gone on a picnic?” Sinclair teased, also taking a seat.

He cast a flat look Sinclair’s way, then began to concentrate, trying to mentally shape in minute detail the gun he had worked with, then materialized it.

Sinclair sat up straight in interest. “May I see it?”

He handed it over. “It may be fused.”

Sinclair tried pulling back the slide; the motion was horribly jerky. “I’m not sure this could fire, but I could try putting a magazine in. I notice there’s no safety, but something like this wouldn’t need one, right?”

He shook his head and pulled one of the magazines out and set it down.

“The balance is also off, but we’ll see.” After inserting the magazine Sinclair chambered a round and winced, but aimed the gun anyway and tried to fire, keeping it well away from his body. The result was far from optimal.

Hisui took the gun back and released it, grabbing the magazine as it fell. “Do you have yours on you so I can get a more recent feel for the balance, as you put it?”

Sinclair nodded and reached across his body and under his jacket. “The safety is on,” he said as he produced his personal weapon, which turned out to be a CZ 75, then ejected the magazine, verified that there was no round chambered, and inserted Hisui’s magazine. He offered it flat-handed.

Hisui tried to hold the thing as Sinclair had. “Is it all right if I fire it once?”

Sinclair stood up and gestured for him to do the same, then pulled him over and gave him a quick lesson in firing, and on what not to do. “Keep your finger straight along the side. Never bring your index finger in unless you intend to pull the trigger. You hold it wrong and twitch in surprise, and God only knows what you’ll put a bullet through. Squeeze the trigger, don’t jerk it. And be prepared for the kick.”

He nodded. There was a kick all right. He certainly understood why Sinclair had said to keep his arm at least slightly relaxed. The recoil on a rigid pose would have been painful and awkward.

“Try another,” Sinclair encouraged. “This is a semi-automatic, so it chambers a new round for you.”

He fired a half dozen more times, getting better accustomed to how it felt, and at aiming, then flipped the safety and handed it back to Sinclair, who ejected the magazine and the chambered bullet, which was pressed back into the magazine.

“Okay. Ready to try again?”

He concentrated, built up the model in his mind, and materialized a new gun. Sinclair holstered his own gun and took the new one. “This one looks better, but let’s see.” The magazine went in, a round was chambered, and Sinclair fired. “Definitely an improvement.” He carefully handed it over,
saying, “Try firing it to feel the difference.”

As he took it he noted that his companion—date!—was being very serious about the whole thing, which was a relief. ‘But then, I suppose, you don’t get to be that good of a hitman with an actual gun by fooling around.’

An hour later he was much closer to a properly working materialized gun. He decided a break was in order and released the gun, catching the magazine and placing it on the stump. “Time for lunch, I think,” he said, and sat down. The strapping was undone and he handed one of the boxes to Sinclair, along with a thermos and bottle of juice. He flipped open the panel on the top of his box to get the hashi out before removing the lid proper.

Sinclair watched for a second, then did the same. “This is adorable.”

He sighed and started eating.

“And you do this kind of thing every day for school?”

“Yes,” he said a bit stiffly. “It’s much less expensive than buying out, and you get exactly what you want.”

“Well… I appreciate the trouble you’ve gone to. Thank you.” Sinclair aimed a smile his way and began eating, having no trouble using hashi.

“The thermos has miso soup,” he said, setting his hashi and box down long enough to open his juice and take a sip.

Sinclair hummed. “Nice. That’s definitely something I’ve developed a fondness for.”

“Why did you learn Japanese?”

“I like languages, and the job takes me to plenty of places. It’s an advantage. Makes me more flexible. How many languages do you know?”

“And… Over a dozen. I’ll probably learn more, since the university focuses on some odd stuff.”

“I’m impressed. You must have a real aptitude for it.”

“I needed a way to relieve my boredom.”

Sinclair’s eyes gleamed mischievously, but he refrained from retorting with some manner of lewdness. “Do you plan to travel once you’re done with university? Plenty of opportunity out there, especially when you’re as good as we are.”

He shrugged. “I’ll have to check out Italy, I suppose. My friend told me about some of the places she visited on her honeymoon.”

Sinclair gasped in mock surprise. “You have an actual friend aside from me? Wow. Well, Italy is very pretty. Some good wines, too. And, of course, the food is superb. Much too easy to gain weight over there if you’re not careful.”

“I’ve never tried any,” he admitted.

Sinclair frowned. “Well, if you allow me to take you out again, I’ll find a good Italian restaurant for us to go to.”
He furrowed his brow. “How long are you even in Japan for?”

“As long as I want to be,” Sinclair replied cheerfully. “I have a trusted contact here who can funnel jobs to me. If I stay long enough I’ll consider buying a place to live. I probably should anyway. Never hurts to have houses in various countries, or even various cities.”

He couldn’t decide if that upset him or not. Or rather, if he was feeling a sneaking sense of pleasure at the idea of having a friend he could actually talk to about his real job. Daisuke was hardly a stranger, but neither was he a friend, not really.

“There’s that look again,” Sinclair said a bit teasingly. “The one that proves you do actually feel something aside from irritation.”

He frowned. “I was thinking of buying a house, but I’m not sure I see the point just yet. Certainly not in Kyoto. It’s too big.”

“Where, then?”

He thought back a second and quoted, “The answer to that would require a whole lot of trust between us.”

Sinclair laughed. “I could find it,” he said smugly. “Besides, kind of hard to build trust unless we spend additional time together. Admit it now, you’re enjoying yourself.”

He scowled. The man was way too good at reading people. “I enjoy languages. I rarely enjoy people.”

Sinclair laughed so hard he had to set his bento down. “I’ll show you how to enjoy a person, if only you’d let me.”

“Shit. I walked right into that,” he muttered.

“You most certainly did. You ever going to tell me which name I can call you by?”

“I get the feeling you’ll accept nothing less than my given name,” he said sourly. “I don’t know how people do things in Italy, anyway, or France. Whatever.”

“You can call me Renato. I do know how you Japanese are.”

“Fine, Ren-san,” he drawled.

“Ooo, lotus or love. I wonder how I should interpret that.”

“Kami-sama,” he whispered and concentrated on his meal again.

Sinclair took pity on him. “Well, there’s a whole world out there of food, and I’ve tried plenty. You can generally find something to enjoy in any country, though I have to admit I’ve never gone to some place like, ah, Yemen. Mostly Europe and Japan. Customs can be a bit strange, depending on where you go. Are you even allowed to speed up your education? Seems a waste to spend so much time at it when it’s obvious you have a natural flair for languages.”

“I plan to check,” he replied. “I’m bored as it is. I thought university might be more challenging, but it’s not. I feel like I’m wasting time. But you can’t skip ahead earlier than that, so I doubt I could for university.”

“How do you feel about branching out later on?”
He shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Sinclair let out a tiny sigh. “Do you know anyone else in the business? Aside from your contact, I mean.”

He started to shake his head, then paused. “I know of someone, but I’ve avoided actually speaking with him. Something about him sets me on edge. Seems way too, I don’t know, hearty. Why did you become a hitman?”

“There was a certain romance to the whole thing,” Sinclair replied, “and I like being so good at something, the planning, the challenge. I could have moved into some ivory tower and spewed equations and theorems until my ears bled, but … as much as like mathematics, that wasn’t terribly attractive as a life. What about you?”

“Ano…” He almost smiled remembering what Sinclair had said a few days previous. “Got a lot of grief growing up. Once I realized what I could do I used that to assess some non-fatal payback. Got noticed, got a recruitment pitch. Didn’t seem like such a big step to make in the end. It more than pays the bills and gets assholes off the street that the police can’t touch.”

Sinclair nodded. “Just doing our part for world peace,” he joked.

“Yeah,” he said, snorting. “World peace through violence.”

Sinclair drained the last of his soup and sighed happily. “Really nice meal. Thank you. You ready to try some more, or…”?

They spent another hour working, and then packed up. Sinclair was a lot more chatty on the drive back, and walked with him up to his apartment. “I would love to do this again,” he said, leaning against the wall. “What do you say? Go out with me again? I’ve behaved myself, haven’t I? Mostly?”

Did he want to? If he were being honest with himself he’d had a good time. “…Fine.”

“Fantastico! I’ll find a good Italian restaurant, then. You own a suit?”

He nodded.

“Perfect. Let’s say, hm. Saturday. Six o’clock? Seven?”

“Seven.”

Sinclair leaned in close, smiling. “Ciao.” Then he pulled away and walked off.

Hisui entered his apartment and locked up, removed his shoes, and stepped up into the hallway. Yori came to greet him with a questioning lilt to his tufted tail.

“That … wasn’t too bad,” he admitted. And he knew of a place he could apparate to for practice, already set up, though he would have to do some checking to ensure it was not a well-frequented location.

“Mrrow?”

“I already know you like him. I’m still trying to decide if I do.”

Yori flicked his tail and pranced off, so Hisui brought everything into the kitchen so he could clean up, then went to check his closet. He passed through the week alternating between interest, boredom,
and agitation. He just knew Sinclair was going to keep coming at him, needling him, forcing him to step outside his comfort zone. ‘To what end?’ he thought. ‘Another conquest?’

He was ready well ahead of time and pacing around the apartment, smoking, on Saturday evening. When three lazy knocks sounded he vanished the cigarette and cast the spells to deal with the residue, then went to open the door.

He was greeted with yet another charming smile, and a small foil-wrapped box. “Eh?”

“Just a little gift,” Sinclair assured him as he stepped inside.

He took it and set it on the entry table, then got his shoes on. Sinclair did not have a car that time; they took a cab. The restaurant was rather different from what he was accustomed to, the décor, and they were shown to an intimate little table with half-height walls around it for privacy. The menu was in Italian and Japanese, which was useful but unnecessary.

“They do a kind of sampler here,” Sinclair pointed out, “so if you’re uncertain you can order that and get a wider idea of things.”

Their server wandered back by with a pitcher of ice cold water and glasses as Hisui perused the menu. When asked about appetizers he cast a somewhat uncertain look at Sinclair, who nodded and said, “The antipasto salad for both of us, please.”

He eventually settled on chicken parmigiana and set his menu aside, right about the time the server returned with the salads. Sinclair ordered ossobuco and a bottle of Sangiovese for them to share.

“Don’t be shy,” Sinclair teased. “If you end up not liking any of it we can always stop by one of the street vendors and get something. Not a big deal.”

He picked up his fork to try the salad, then hummed thoughtfully and nodded. “I think I like it.”

Sinclair decided to speak of various places he had visited in Japan, making for easy conversation, so he was fairly at ease when the main course arrived, though he furrowed his brow when Sinclair sliced off a small piece of his veal and offered it to him to taste. It was a new fork, so that wasn’t the problem; it was something of an intimate gesture to his mind. Despite that he accepted it and gave fair attention to how it tasted, trying not to notice that Sinclair used the same fork for himself.

“Mm. That’s interesting,” he opined, then started in on his own. He tended not to eat tomatoes unless they were raw, so his meal was a pleasant surprise, and the freshly grated Parmesan added a certain something. The vegetables were lovely, too, cooked just right, and the wine had a fruitiness to it that went well with everything.

“You seem to be enjoying it,” Sinclair commented.

He nodded. “I like it. I would definitely eat this again. And probably come back here to try other things.”

Sinclair smiled. “I’m glad to hear that. I’d cook if I could, but I’ve never been any good at it. A shame, because I do so enjoy food, though it always seems to taste better when someone else does the cooking.”

“I—maybe.” There was something to be said for cooking for yourself, because then you could tweak the flavors. “That hasn’t been my experience until now, but when it comes to this, never having tasted Italian before, or tried to cook it, I wouldn’t know.”
“I’ll have to introduce you to some others,” Sinclair said. “French, maybe Thai.”

“You’re assuming a lot,” he complained.

Sinclair grinned. “No. I’ll ask, like a gentleman. And you’ll scowl at me in that adorable way of yours, and realize I’ll keep asking, and finally say yes just to shut me up.”

He started to scowl and caught himself. “The university won’t let me test ahead or double up.”

“That’s a shame. Still, it leaves you plenty of time for other things.”

“Like going out with you?” he asked before he could stop himself.

“What a wonderful idea! I’m so glad you suggested it. Maybe next week we can try some more tests. You were doing really well and I get the feeling you’ll figure it out fairly quickly. Then you could move on to the second part of it, though I have my doubts there, given how the ammunition is actually, ah…”

“I know. But even having the first part would be useful.”

“You up for dessert?”

He took stock and realized he could manage a bit more, so he nodded. “Any suggestions?”

Sinclair leered a little. “You like chocolate? I’d say the chocolate amaretti cake.”

“You just can’t get through the day without flirting, can you.”

Sinclair shook his head. “Impossible. Unthinkable.” To the server who showed up he responded, “Chocolate amaretti cake and tiramisu, please.”

“Well, then I won’t take your flirting personally.”

“Oh, now, I wouldn’t go that far. It’s very personal. I am rather single-minded in my pursuits, and you just happen to be in my sights.”

He sighed. “Right. Until something else catches your eye and you flit off.”

“You don’t know that, though,” Sinclair pointed out. “You should give me more credit. True, I’ve had my amusements, but that doesn’t mean I’m not looking for something enduring.”

“With me?” he asked in disbelief.

Sinclair got a vaguely frustrated look on his face that vanished when the server returned with two plates and set them down. He grabbed his dessert fork and nipped off a section of his tiramisu, and offered it up. Hisui accepted it with a slight sigh, then tilted his head. It was kind of nice, actually. He nodded and tried his cake, humming in pleasure at the taste.

“So how long ago did this friend of yours get married?”


“I’m going to make a wild guess and say you acted a bit like her older brother, probably made sure no one preyed on her, because even small towns have undesirable elements to them. You’re probably annoyed that she didn’t go to university, but have mostly accepted that she’s doing what makes her happy.”
“Are you sure you’re not a psychologist?”

“Ah, so I’m right. I’ll also guess that she was one of the few, or only, people who never gave you grief growing up, and that you don’t care for her hus—hang on. That man you mentioned, the one with connections…”

“How do you do that?” he almost whined.

Sinclair smiled lazily. “I would trot out my usual, or even the one where I tell people I can read minds, but it’s just a combination of observation, a good memory, and intelligence. It’s like an equation in my head for me to solve. I like solving equations. They often lead to new ones to solve, like some beautiful fractal flower.”

His brow furrowed at the analogy. He did fine in maths, sure, but…

Sinclair finished up his tiramisu and set his fork down. “That was delicious. Unless you want to round things off with coffee…”

Hisui shook his head as he ate the last of his cake and set his fork down. After Sinclair took care of the bill they grabbed a cab back to his apartment, and Sinclair leaned on the wall again outside. “You up for another round at the clearing? Same time as before? Saturday?”

He stared for long moments before he nodded.

Sinclair pushed away from the wall and leaned in again, eyes gleaming. “I look forward to it. Ciao.”

Hisui watched him walk away, then went inside, seeing the little foil-wrapped box. After he removed his shoes he picked it up and brought it to the kitchen so he could investigate. Inside were four little lavender-tinted, flower-shaped somethings. They smelled awfully good. Yori jumped up onto the table and sniffed, then mewed an okay, so Hisui tentatively nibbled on one. “Mm, interesting. Tastes like sweet almonds.”

He finished the one he had and put the cover back on; he could eat the rest later. To get his mind off the very disturbing way Sinclair was edging into his life he turned his thoughts to the issue of bullets. Yes, he could materialize bullets, but without primer on the ends they would be useless. He did not think he could transfigure that sort of thing.

Still, if he ever wanted to use a gun for a hit, to potentially disguise who was behind the job, perhaps he could simply make sure any real bullets he had were entirely, utterly clean of any prints, skin oils, whatever, and use his power to pack them into a magazine. He could keep those in an extended pouch or pocket.

And then there was the question asked of whether or not he could create other attacks, such as fire or magma. Not even Daisuke had given him names of all the Flames of Earth, but Sinclair having information almost made it easier to imagine certain things, certain possibilities.

He made oyakodon for their lunch. He had a clever little stacked container that held the rice in the bottom, the chicken mixture in the next compartment up, and then the bowls fit on top upside down and were held in place with latches. That he had “enhanced” it with runes to maintain temperature was not something he would bother mentioning.

Another little container held manjū and cinnamon yatsuhashi. He also brought some of the lemon-lime soft drink he preferred. Sinclair had not objected to it at his apartment that one time, so it should
be fine. It was better chilled, but also fine at room temperature.

Sinclair showed up right on time and again had a car available. Hisui was curious, but not quite curious enough to ask if it was rented or borrowed. He set everything down on the stump again and got to work. Sinclair was eventually satisfied enough to load a magazine of real bullets in to the obsidian gun and shoot. “I think you’ve pretty much managed it, Hisui.”

He twitched at the sheer familiarity, but nodded.

“Now the question is whether you can do it at a moment’s notice, slap in a magazine, and shoot.”

He nodded again, but took the gun back after Sinclair removed the real parts and released it. “Time for lunch, then.” He sat down and carefully unpacked everything, portioned the food into bowls and handed one over with some hashi, and placed a drink next to his companion.

Sinclair hummed appreciatively and, after a moment, said, “Now I’m curious to see how your gyūdon is.”

“That sounded either like a request for another time, or a subtle hint toward dinner at my apartment,” he thought.

“Did you become a cook to learn, or because you already knew how?”

“To learn. I wanted to be able to fend for myself, not have cupboards full of cup noodles, nor rely on delivery or takeout.”

Sinclair nodded. “Well, as I told you, I had a French father and an Italian mother. She apparently successfully argued for the right to name me and was an excellent cook. Unfortunately, she ate herself into an early death, and my father’s wandering eyes and hands made life difficult. Still never could quite get the hang of cooking, though, even with that motivation. I admire that you’ve managed so well.”

He blinked. ‘So … some of his attitude comes from something other than privilege? Huh.’ “I grew up in an orphanage,” he said, and immediately brought more food to his mouth.

Sinclair eyed him for a moment, then nodded. “Even more admirable. Given any more thought to other uses of your flames?”

He sighed faintly in relief that Sinclair had not pushed and nodded. “The senbon came from sharp irritation, annoyance, even disgust. I don’t need to feel that way anymore—haven’t for a long time. If I can imagine it I can usually make it. Complex things are obviously harder. But fire?”


“I don’t normally feel anything that strongly.”

Sinclair eyed him again, his brow faintly furrowed. His gaze wandered off to the side as he took a drink. “On behalf of yourself?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Originally, creating the senbon. Was it personal irritation, or on someone else’s behalf?”

“Oh. Myself.”

Sinclair was quiet again for a while, then said, “Hypothetical situation. Someone breaks into your
apartment and tries to harm or kill Yori. Or your friend’s husband’s job brings her into the line of fire.”

He frowned and stared at the ground. Yori could probably take care of himself, but Nana? He would like to think Sawada was smart enough to keep his presumably oblivious wife away from all of that, but he supposed it was possible that someone with a grudge might follow the man to their home in Namimori.

“Think it over, stuff like that,” Sinclair said after a minute. “Not pleasant, but it’s a thought. And, who knows? Something else might be a suitable trigger.”

Dessert was well received, which was nice, and he found out that Sinclair like cinnamon. After lunch he worked on materialization speed, trying to get a perfect gun as quickly as possible. Once Sinclair pointed out that he could probably make more than one in succession, even if they were far more complicated than senbon, they developed a little scheme. He would make a gun and, while he was making the next one, Sinclair would test the first.

By the time he was sick of it for the day he had made decent progress. He packed up and they returned to his apartment. Feeling generous he invited Sinclair in, though he scowled at the look sent his way. Yori came to greet them and give a friendly meow, but was obviously looking for the chameleon.

“Sorry, Yori,” Sinclair apologized. “I’ll bring him next time, okay?”

Yori flipped his tail and pranced away, so Hisui headed into the kitchen to wash up. Sinclair just leaned against the arch frame and watched. “Does—no, will your contact supply you with real bullets? Or just the plastic ones?”

Hisui set a bowl into the drying rack and looked over his shoulder briefly. “I have no idea. He seemed surprised and a bit uneasy at first when I asked if I could examine a gun, but he was all for the idea of me trying to create one once that sank in. The original thought behind all of this was to create a temporary weapon I could use to fire senbon so I wouldn’t have to control them in any way, but I didn’t think it through at the time. I know now that I’d need something entirely different in design and I’m better off using them as I do, and work with a gun as an entirely separate option.”

“Wow,” Sinclair said quietly. “I think that might be the most I’ve ever heard you say.”

He bit his lip in annoyance and finished washing up.

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’m feeling a little warm and fuzzy because of it. It makes me think you actually enjoy my company.”

He pushed aside how that made him feel and turned around. “What do you know about the Vongola Famiglia?”

Sinclair blinked at him. “Ah, they’re the biggest famiglia, and the most powerful, flame-based. They have a lot of allies, more than a few enemies. They originally began as a vigilante group to protect themselves and the local populace. Things went a bit downhill during the second generation, but it seems to be leaning back toward its origins these last few. They don’t deal in the baser things. You know, prostitution, drugs, that kind of thing. Fairly upright. Why? Your friend’s husband?”

He nodded. “I didn’t find out until after the wedding.” The doorbell went and he frowned, then walked past Sinclair to go answer it.

Daisuke was standing there, carrying the usual briefcase, but he looked behind Hisui and went still.
“Is this a bad time?”

“Tch.” He waved Daisuke in and stalked off to the living room to sit down. Sinclair decided to lounge right next to him on the sofa, slinging an arm along the back.

Daisuke took a chair and just stared. “Well. This is a surprise.”

“Yeah, whatever. What have you got?”

His handler looked away from Sinclair and opened his briefcase, pulled out a folder, then offered it. “Another flame-user.”

He flipped it open and started reading, then sneered. “That’s disgusting,” he murmured. The target was a Cloud who liked to use his flames to replicate his victim’s brain cells—always males, usually ones with very attractive ladies on their arms—until they died. And if they did not die from that, it was from brainstem compression. The target was another one who operated in a fairly narrow area and the autopsy reports piling up had sparked an investigation from a victim’s mafia-connected girlfriend. The client favored messy.

He closed it and handed it back. “I’ll do it.”

Sinclair hummed. “You going to cross-dress again? Because if so, I want to see it.”

He sighed and reached over to elbow him. “Stop reading over my shoulder. And only if you’re the poor sap who gets his brain turned to mush.”

“Ah, no. That would make my job a bit difficult. And I wouldn’t be nearly so charming.”

Hisui reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, then turned to Daisuke. “The gun is coming along well. I’m getting faster. At some point I’ll want a supply of real ammunition.”

Daisuke’s eyes widened. “Excellent news. Yeah, I’ll run that by them. Shouldn’t be a problem.” He shrugged. “There might be times when a gun might actually be a better option, though with how well you complete contracts I confess I’m not seeing how at the moment.”

“So, the Biforcuto Famiglia,” Sinclair commented. “Good reputation you guys have.”

“Thank you?” Daisuke replied. “You picked up another name, by the way.”

Hisui sighed. “What now?”

“Baric.”

“…At least that one has some relevance.”

Daisuke grinned faintly and nodded. “Right. I’m off.”

He let the man see himself out, then looked sidelong when he felt Sinclair’s arm drop down onto his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I’m Italian,” Sinclair said cheerfully. “We’re a touchy-feely people. So tell me, how did you get so damn lucky as to end up with green eyes?”

He shook his head. “Not willing to talk about that.”

“That’s all right,” Sinclair said easily. “We on for next Saturday? We can do some more work on that
gun, then maybe go out for dinner. Found a lovely little French place.”

‘Is it really so horrible that I’m getting used to him?’ he wondered. ‘Even if all he really wants in the end is to get laid, he’s obviously willing to work for it, and wait for it. Kami-sama.’ ‘Fine.’

Sinclair squeezed his arm gently. “I’ll pick you up at the usual time, and then afterward at seven again?”

He nodded.

Sinclair leaned in sideways, his mouth right next to Hisui’s ear. “Ciao.” Then he reclaimed his arm, stood, and saw himself out.

He was left sitting on the couch feeling a bit befuddled. The man’s breath on his ear—he got up and locked the door, then checked Yori’s water dish.

He spent an evening wandering through the target’s operational area while disillusioned, just to set the place in his mind, then returned the next day during lunch to make the hit. As poetic justice he exploded the target’s head, just like from one of those silly sci-fi movies. He was back in his apartment and headed to school a minute later.

“You could make your own bullets,” Sinclair pointed out during their next session, “but I expect that’d get boring pretty quickly.”

“Considered it. Not interested,” he replied. “True, I don’t exactly plan to use a gun often, so making my own might make sense, but I’m just not interested.”

Sinclair shrugged. “Your aim is getting a lot better.”

He almost smiled. That was a compliment of high order coming from someone who used a gun as his livelihood. “Thank you. I think that’s enough for today.”

“Sure.” On the ride back Sinclair asked, “How do you manage to keep the food at just the right temperature?”

“…I’m just that good,” he deadpanned, and got a laugh for it. Sinclair dropped him off and promised to return at seven, so he went inside and got cleaned up, then got his suit ready. He idly wondered what Sinclair would look like in a pair of jeans and promptly face-palmed over his traitorous thoughts. “Shit.”

He smoked rather too much until it was time to get ready, then smoked another one after he was dressed. When the three expected knocks came he stubbed out his cigarette and cast the usual spells, patted his pocket to make sure he had his keys, and went to open the door. Sinclair handed him another foil-wrapped box, which he set aside.

Shortly thereafter they were seated at a French restaurant. He took in the décor with mild interest and read through the menu. When the server had ensured they were set for ice water and inquired about hors d’oeuvres, Hisui glanced at Sinclair, who tilted his head and said, “The Reblochon tarts, please.” The server hastened off. “Have you decided?”

“I think,” he said slowly, not feeling especially brave, “the chicken cordon bleu.”

Sinclair nodded. “Never a bad choice, and with the right sauce it’s delectable.” He then went on to talk about places he knew of in France until the server returned and set a small plate of tarts down. “We’ll be having the chicken cordon bleu,” he said, gesturing slightly toward Hisui, “and the pork
tenderloin Diane. As for wine…”

Once the server had departed again Hisui cautiously bit into a tart and decided he liked it. Sinclair smiled at that and continued telling him about France in between bites. When the meal arrived he did his usual, slicing off a small bit of his tenderloin and offering it.

After Hisui finished swallowing he said, “Maybe just slightly too much lemon for my tastes, but otherwise I like it.” Then he started on his own, which he also quite liked.

“How do you feel about amusement parks?”

He blinked and looked up. “Eh?”

“Amusement parks,” Sinclair repeated. “I was considering inviting you to one. I suppose it depends on whether or not you like roller-coasters. I read something recently about the park Disney is putting together in Tokyo, but that won’t be open for months. There are others, though. And aquariums.”

He blinked a few more times and started laughing softly. ‘This guy is unreal!’

A look of shock stole over Sinclair’s face at his reaction, but it was quickly erased.

After he got it out of his system and sobered up again he said, “That would be an interesting choice. I suppose I wouldn’t mind going to an aquarium. Roller-coasters irritate me because I don’t have any control over the motion.”

“…Right. So that’s a yes?”

“Sure.”

Sinclair clutched at his chest. “You said something other than ‘fine’. Are you feeling well?”

Hisui pressed his index finger to his lips to prevent a smile, got himself under control, and started eating again. For dessert he chose an apple tart while Sinclair went for crème brûlée and, as usual, Sinclair shared a bite, making sure to include a bit of one of the banana slices laid on top. He was pleased with both of them and said so.

“What do you plan to do for your break?”

“No idea. I didn’t do much last time, and it’s still almost three months away.”

Sinclair simply nodded, but he had a calculating gleam in his eyes. “I’m sure something will come up.” He handed a credit card to the server when he walked by and they were shortly in a cab and then back at the apartment.

Hisui sighed faintly at the look he was getting. “Oh, all right. You can come in,” he said and unlocked the door. “Yori will be upset with you, though.”

“Right, because Leon isn’t with me. Next time. I don’t usually bring Leon along because he’s a bit sensitive to gun shots, and I didn’t think you’d appreciate me leaving him here while we were out.”

At first he could not think why, but then remembered that the two could communicate. While Yori would probably prevent any spying, he could see why Sinclair might think that. “It’s fine. Yori would make sure he didn’t get into any trouble. I’d be concerned only because I have no idea what a chameleon might require on hand.” His shoes went off and the package got reclaimed and brought to the kitchen to be placed on the counter for the time being.
“Don’t suppose you have any coffee in this place?”

He snorted and shook his head. “The closest I’ve come to coffee was that tiramisu.”

“A soft drink will be fine, then.”

He turned around to stare before saying, “You’re so pushy. If you want one, get it yourself.”

“All right,” Sinclair said agreeably. “Would you also like one?”

“Sure.” He reached out for his cigarettes, lighter, and ashtray and set them on the table as Sinclair got out the drinks, then took a seat and lit up.

Sinclair took a seat and pushed over a drink, then gestured at the pack. At Hisui’s nod he took a cigarette as well and lit it.

“How is it that you can communicate with Leon?”

“It’s just one of those things. Kinda like magic.”

Hisui blinked. “Magic?”

“Ever heard the term squib?”

His eyes went wide with surprise and he took a long drag in a futile effort to hide his reaction.

“Okay, you have. And judging by your reaction you’re not thinking of any of the mundane definitions. My mother was a squib. Maybe my ability is related, maybe not. I have one hard and fast rule as a hitman these days; I don’t take jobs in Britain. Too much weirdness going on over there. I don’t even go near France these days. And now you’re going to tell me the reason you can do things like keep the container temperatures perfect and be like a ghost on hits is because you’re magical, right?”

“Well, no.”

“True, you weren’t going to tell me, but I’m nonetheless right,” Sinclair said confidently.

“I think you might actually be smarter than me,” he finally said.

“I’m just that good,” Sinclair said smugly. “And part of the reason why you’ve been so prickly is because of the Statute of Secrecy.”

Instead of glaring or scowling he half-smiled fleetingly. “Yes, I’m magical. I’ve always known that.”

“You have a purebred kneazel for a pet. Another huge clue.”

After exhaling another drag he said, “Then maybe you can answer something for me.”

“Yes?”

“I never got an invite to Mahōtokoro. I always wondered if it was because I was flame-active.”

Sinclair sat back. “I don’t know, but it’s possible. You’re the first person I’ve met with both. It’s possible the flames disguise your magic to whatever system they use to find students. I’ll make a wild guess and say you don’t use a wand.”
“I was consciously flame-active early on and didn’t stumble over any magical enclaves for some
time. I’ve learned without that crutch. If nothing else, becoming a hitman meant I could afford all
those books I wanted, and other supplies.”

“You started out stealing them.”

He did not bother to get annoyed at that point. “Yes.”

“I don’t think it’s the magic that explains your eyes.”

He shook his head. “Still not willing to talk about that.”

“Not yet,” Sinclair said confidently, then finished off his cigarette and drained the last of his drink. “I
had a good time tonight.”

“So did I,” he replied with a small smile. “Saturday again?”

Sinclair nodded. “I’ll have to see if I can find a Thai restaurant in town.”

“All right.” He finished off his cigarette and got up, and headed for the door when Sinclair also
stood. As he was reaching for the handle to open it he felt Sinclair at his shoulder.

“Ciao,” was breathed in his ear again before the man slipped out, leaving him a bit befuddled again.
“Just imagine,” Sinclair said cheerfully. “If you ever took up golf as a hobby, you would never need a caddy. You could just make all your own clubs on the fly.”

He sent his companion a look of disbelief. “I cannot imagine doing so. Walking great distances just so I can smack a small ball around? And have to resist the temptation to just fly the things there using my power?”

“Oh, just think,” Sinclair said, his expression going a bit distant and dreamy, “there I am, in your apartment, and you hold me captive with gravity. Why, I’d not be able to resist your wicked advances!”

He face-palmed. “Maybe I should find out where you live so I can hold the door closed with you still inside.”

“One, you would have to know where, as you said. Two, that would make it difficult for me to spend time with you. Three, I doubt you could keep that up in your sleep. Four, I would just break out and come annoy you anyway. So, do you know how to—I forget what it’s called. Teleport?”

“Teleport is close enough, and yes.”

“Can you carry a passenger?” Sinclair asked, that gleam back in his eyes.

“I don’t know. Never tried it before. Never needed to. Doing that with a passenger increases the risks of splinching.” At the questioning look he received he added, “Anything from opening cuts or gashes on the body, partial separation of limbs, to leaving body parts behind.”

Sinclair winced. “Distance a factor?”

“Yes.”

“Want to try it here, say, across the clearing?”

He worried his lower lip between his teeth. “I suppose knowing the answer to that would be useful. But—I would want some supplies if I did, just in case. Healing items.”

Sinclair nodded. “I’m willing to try if you are.”

“Ano… Hold on. I’ll be right back.” When Sinclair nodded he disapparated to his apartment and rummaged around in the chest he stored potions supplies in, then apparated back.

“You never need to worry about losing your keys, do you?”

He rolled his eyes and set his supplies on the stump, then stood next to Sinclair and gestured at his arm. As soon as it was offered he took it, and apparated them promptly, to over near the targets, then released him. “That didn’t seem too difficult,” he commented, eyeing Sinclair as he tried to recover from the sensation. “Just as well we haven’t eaten yet, or you might have thrown up.”

“A little warning might have been nice,” Sinclair chided a bit hoarsely. “That was unpleasant.”

“Imagine feeling that as a child when you’ve just teleported on instinct,” he said wryly. “Aside from
your stomach trying to leap out of your throat or wanting to violently expel your lungs, are you all right?"

“Yes, though I have a new appreciation for how my bullets must feel, if they could feel. Give me a second.”

He nodded. “Apparently it still falls under the necessary visualization. I didn’t feel any strain whatsoever. I suppose after a little practice to be sure, I could probably apparate a passenger anywhere within my range.”

“And that range is?”

“No idea. Eight hundred kilometers isn’t outside reason, maybe a thousand.”

“Definitely see why someone tagged you as Phantom. The magic thing is pretty handy,” Sinclair said, easing back to normal. “Okay. Try again?”

They spent the next hour at that, with short breaks between to allow Sinclair to recover, though his recovery time was steadily improving. “Portkeys are worse in my opinion. It’s like someone attached a hook to your navel and yanked you through space-time. And if you should lose hold of it while in transit, serious injury or death is possible.”

“I’ll pass. How about we eat, and afterward back to speed?”

“Sure.” He had made miso-braised pork, the usual rice, and steamed vegetables.

“I may keep you just for the cooking, never mind what else I’m interested in,” Sinclair commented after a few bites.

“I’m glad you like the food,” he said a bit sourly.

“I like you more,” Sinclair said teasingly.

“You’re just interested in the challenge.”

Sinclair frowned at him. “Time will prove my intentions. Speaking of time, I have a couple of jobs I need to attend to, so I’ll be away for a bit.”

“Oh.”

“But I’ll bring you back a gift, for having deprived you of my company. Maybe a souvenir.”

He sighed faintly. Hopefully Sinclair’s idea of a souvenir was appropriate.

“Never fear. I’ll hold you close to my heart while I’m away.”

‘I like this guy again, why?’ “I’m flattered.” He might even have meant that.

When they got back to the apartment Yori and Leon seemed to be deep in conversation, however it was that animals communicated with each other, so Sinclair left him there for the time being. Or, as he said, “I’ll bring him home after dinner.”

Hisui had to wonder just how many restaurants Sinclair had sampled throughout Kyoto to keep finding places. They started off with ordering spring rolls and while waiting on those Sinclair said, “How do you feel about spiciness?”
He shrugged. “Not something I’m particularly used to?”

“I’d say go with something like phat thai. It’s an easy entry to this kind of food. Or, they do a dish with chicken in a garlic sauce with mixed vegetables that’s quite nice.”

He glanced at the menu again and nodded. “Probably the second one. What about you?”

“Ah, I think I’ll go with the pineapple chicken curry.”

And that probably meant he would be able to gauge what Sinclair meant by spicy without ending up with a meal he could not bear to finish. “None of the beverages sound all that appealing,” he remarked.

Sinclair nodded, then again at the server who appeared with the appetizer. He ordered the main course, some iced coffee for himself, and then placed one of the spring rolls on his plate and spooned some of the sauce on, as well.

He did likewise and had a taste. The sauce was sweet, the wrapper was crisp, and the overall flavor was pleasing. He nodded, and noticed that Sinclair smiled. “How long will you be gone?”

“A week, week and a half. Probably not longer than that. Some people are very fussy about who does certain jobs.”

That gave him pause. “I’d never really thought about it, but I guess that makes sense.” Flame-users could do some amazing things, depending on the type and how they utilized their abilities. Sinclair might not use his obviously, but it was entirely possible he used them to boost his own ability with a gun.

“Since I’ve never actually been to Thailand, I’ll tell you about Greece instead,” Sinclair said, then started rambling about locations there. When the main course arrived he paused long enough to offer some of his curry, before rambling on again.

Hisui’s first thought was, ‘Spicy.’ It was good, but the spiciness of it was a bit much for him and it was overpowering the other flavors. His meal, however, was wonderful, and he tucked in happily as he listened to Sinclair’s travelogue.

He invited Sinclair in again once back at the apartment without so much as a twinge. After all, the man had to collect his chameleon. They had a cigarette out on the balcony, looking out over the city.

“I have your phone number, so I’ll call you when I get back.”

Objecting to the invasion of privacy would be fruitless, so he simply nodded. “That’s assuming I’m home.”

“I have my ways.”

“You mean your insects,” he replied.

Sinclair slowly turned his head toward Hisui. “You were not supposed to figure that out.”

“I’m just that good,” he teased.

Sinclair edged closer and dropped an arm around his shoulders. “One of these days I’ll find out. Ever considered getting a mobile phone?”

“Why? So you can send me text messages at all hours?”
“Now there’s an idea. No, I just think they’re handy. And someday they’ll manage to make them into little computers and they’ll be even more amusing.”

“Maybe.”

“I like the one I bought here. Some of the features are nice. Unfortunately, most of that doesn’t work outside Japan. Well, thank you for a lovely evening. I have a plane to catch in the morning, so…” The arm was reclaimed as Sinclair finished off his cigarette. “Suppose I have to find Leon, now.”

Leon was reclaimed from his cozy spot next to Yori and placed on Sinclair’s hat. Hisui walked with him to the door, saying, “Thank you for dinner.”

Sinclair leaned in for his usual good-bye and slipped out, leaving Hisui to wonder if he was slowly going insane. He was starting to look forward to that. On that thought he went to investigate the little gift and found it contained petit fours.

During the time that Sinclair was gone he attended classes as usual and tried not to be bored, amused himself by materializing all manner of objects, and looked into Italian cooking. He was being infected with an appreciation for non-Japanese cuisine. He also taught himself how to pick locks with materialized tools.

He was not long back from classes when the phone rang; it was Sinclair, angling for an invite. Hisui was somewhat dismayed to realize he was excited to see him again. He had been even more bored than usual without a visit to look forward to. He face-palmed and lit up, using the cigarette to settle himself, and was able to answer the door with relative composure.

Sinclair arrived with a bag of takeout from a Chinese place around the corner and hustled it into the kitchen, along with a cylindrical metal tin. Hisui was left to close and lock the door in his wake and follow. Sinclair already had the bag unpacked and was opening cartons to figure out which was which.

“Ciao! I brought food, obviously. And I have some news.”

He moved to get some drinks and hashi and investigate the offering, then sat down and pulled a carton of moo goo gai pan close, along with one of rice. “News?” he prompted.

Sinclair removed his hat and set it aside, at which point Leon scampered off to find Yori, then secured a carton of orange chicken and said, “Seems there was a big altercation amongst the Vongola. No real details on why. However, it seems their independent assassination squad, called the Varia, staged a coup d’état. The Vongola Nono’s son Xanxus was behind it. He’s on ice now.”

His brow went up.

“Not sure if he’s dead or not. The report I got was a bit vague. Suppose I could send in some spies, but I prefer not to irritate such a large and powerful famiglia. The Vongola mansion took some heavy damage, though. It’ll cost a pretty penny to repair, but they’re rolling in it. I’m just a little stunned. You don’t normally see that sort of thing in a famiglia like that. They’re usually pretty stable.”

“Some aren’t?”

Sinclair shook his head. “Some have a lot of internal strife. That’s why it’s good you’re associated with Biforcuto. Not a lot of drama there.”

“Good to know. I’d hate the idea of suddenly having a new contact because mine got his head blown off.”
“If it ever came to that it’d be easy to get you set up. You’re kind of a hot property, especially since almost no one has any idea who you are.”

It was a novel feeling to be considered valuable. “Do you ever do jobs for the Vongola?”

Sinclair did a weird shrug. “They don’t often farm out jobs. Don’t have much need to.”

“You won’t be affected, then,” he said with a nod. “I assume your jobs went well.”

After a short pause for Sinclair to finish eating his current mouthful he said, “Simple and clean. I was feeling feisty so I shot them through the head instead of the heart this time.”

He was half way through his food when he remembered that Sawada was Vongola. He would have to send a letter to Nana subtly probing for information. If she responded with nothing out of the ordinary it should mean that Sawada was fine, or well enough. “So the Vongola have an independent assassination group?”

“For the most difficult of jobs, yes,” Sinclair replied. “You have to be ridiculously good to be invited to join them, and even then, if you fail a job, you’re liable to either end up dead or seriously injured. A friend of mine was invited, but he declined. Too busy working on his medical degree, and he likes being a free agent. You also have to know at least seven languages, otherwise they won’t even bother paying attention. And then, it’s the top seven flames, with sub-groups under each flame, kind of like a pyramid of sorts.”

He grimaced. “Doesn’t sound at all appealing.”

“They tend to be the absolute best, but they also tend to have serious problems with sanity and interpersonal skills. In that sense my friend would fit right in. He likes to boast he’s infected with over six hundred diseases that all cancel each other out, and he’s utterly convinced he’s God’s gift to women, regardless of how often he strikes out. He can barely focus on one woman long enough to get anywhere before he’s distracted by the next one.” Sinclair rolled his eyes.

“Right. Remind me never to be in drag around him, then,” he said dryly.

Sinclair snickered. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Speaking of being in costume, do you ever wear something other than a suit?”

“Only in bed,” Sinclair said with a smirk. “And then nothing at all.”

He sighed. “You look very sharp in a suit. I just wondered if you owned anything that wasn’t Armani.”

“Gucci, actually.”

“Whatever,” he said irritably.

Sinclair grinned. “Yes, I own more casual clothes. I rarely wear them. It’s hard to justify a fedora while wearing Levi’s.”

“I still don’t understand how your hair does that when you wear a hat so much of the time,” he said, eyeing the way it spiked and still looked entirely natural.

“It’s like the rays of the sun, unfettered and … I don’t know where I was going with that one.”

He laughed softly and immediately bit his lip.
Sinclair grinned again and finished off his carton. “When you’re done, open the tin. It’s my ‘sorry for depriving you of my company’ apology gift.”

He glanced into his carton and grabbed the last of it, then got up to dispose of the empties and put the hashi in the sink. After sitting back down he pushed the lid off the tin and was hit with the scent of chocolate. “Hm?”

“Double chocolate biscotti. As a bonus, they keep well.”

He pulled one out and offered the tin to Sinclair, who also took one, and set the tin aside. He was in love after one bite. Because of that he pressed the lid back into place and sent it over to the counter in an attempt at avoiding temptation. “I definitely like these,” he admitted, then had another bite.

“Good. I chose well, then.”

It was fairly early and, well—‘Fine,’ he thought. “Would you like to watch a movie?”

Sinclair’s eyes widened slightly. “Yes. What do you have?”

“Just pick whatever. I don’t have anything I wouldn’t watch again.”

Sinclair wandered off into the living room so Hisui finished cleaning up, then grabbed fresh drinks and went out to join his—friend? Friend. After he sat down he brought the usual supplies over and lit up. Sinclair was fairly quiet during the movie, though he did snake an arm around Hisui’s shoulders again, and it was not until the credits rolled that he realized Sinclair was asleep.

‘Jet lag? At least he doesn’t snore.’ He carefully extricated himself and arranged Sinclair on the sofa, then went to go fetch a blanket to cover him with. The man’s clothing would suffer for it, but he was not about to undress him. After turning off the player and television he had a cigarette on the balcony and retired to his room, but not before switching on the bathroom light and leaving that door open.

He woke up at six and stumbled out, only to find Sinclair sitting in the kitchen sipping a soft drink and having a smoke. ‘Right. He fell asleep. That thing people keep raving about.’ After a slow blink he veered off to make tea.

“I apologize for the inconvenience. That was not intended.”

He fluttered a hand around incoherently and reached for a mug. Two spoons of sugar went in, a little milk, and a tea bag. The hell with the British and their argument on the proprieties of tea making; it was bagged tea! His kettle shut off so he poured, set the kettle back, and ferried his tea to the table and sat down. As he reached for a cigarette he checked the time, then lit up.

“You’re not exactly a morning ray of sunshine, are you,” Sinclair commented.

He exhaled and blinked slowly. “What?”

“I’ll just give you a few minutes, then,” Sinclair said with amusement and sat back.

A few minutes later he was removing the tea bag and giving things a stir, and then drinking the lifeblood of the Empire. And possibly India. He was uncertain on that point. “Jet lag?” he finally asked.

Sinclair nodded.

“If I’d known I probably wouldn’t have suggested a movie, but it’s fine. I wasn’t exactly worried
you were going to make off with my collection of antique silver. If you absconded with the Pocky, however, I might have to kill you. Nothing personal.” He had another sip and watched as amusement flooded back to Sinclair’s face.

“Something changed.”

“You feel asleep,” he said simply.

Sinclair’s brow furrowed for a second, then smoothed out. “Ah.” Then he grinned. “And so did you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, his gaze cutting away for a split second. “Where do you live, anyway?”

“Would you like to visit my den of iniquity? I have a monthly rental right now. Some of the famiglie own buildings and allow people to rent apartments while they’re in the country. And, if you take on the occasional job for whichever famiglia while you’re there, there’s no charge at all.” He paused. “But maybe that’s because I’m so damn good.”

At least he was smug about something he had every right to be smug about. He drained his tea and got up to start a second cup, as well as get a few things out to make breakfast and his lunch with. He covered a yawn and got started, pausing only to pour water into the mug to let it steep, then quickly plated breakfast for two.

He slid them onto the table, got hashi, and brought his tea over. “I wasn’t sure how you felt about a normal Japanese breakfast, so…” He trailed off and started eating. As soon as he was done he was back up and preparing a bento for later, swiftly getting that taken care of and set aside. Sinclair was done by then so he did the washing up and looked around for a moment, then filled Yori’s dishes.

“You’re an efficient little thing.”

He turned a scowl on Sinclair. “I am not little. I’m of average height.”

Sinclair held up his hands in mock surrender. “We on for Saturday?”

He nodded. “If you’re willing to risk it I can just try apparating us there. I think I can do it, but it’s up to you.”

“I’ll risk it. Just have healing stuff on hand, though I can speed up my own healing if necessary.”

“All right.” He glanced at the clock and was about to speak again when Sinclair did.

“I should probably get going. You have to finish getting ready for classes.” Sinclair rose and looked around. “And find Leon.”

“Yori,” he called. “Where’s Leon?”

The two of them scampered in moments later, so Sinclair reclaimed his chameleon, placed him on his hat, and picked it up. “I’ll see you Saturday.”

Hisui just stood there.

Sinclair moved around the table and leaned in. “Ciao,” he said, pressed a soft kiss to Hisui’s lips, then swiftly departed.

He pressed a finger to his lips and looked down for a moment. ‘So this is why girls get all giggly? I had no idea I was capable of a reaction like this.’ He shook his head and went to lock the door, then
continued with his morning routine.

He was a bit distracted during classes the remainder of the week, but persevered. It was not as though they needed a lot of brain power anyway. When Saturday rolled around he prepared another bento set and ensured he had healing items and other supplies. Sinclair released Leon to go join Yori after being let in, and Hisui grabbed the stack before offering his arm to his friend.

Sinclair took it without any hesitation, so he appared to the clearing and set the bentos down. Sinclair let go and breathed deeply. “Distance adds a certain zest to the whole thing,” he remarked dryly, and swallowed hard. “But we’re good.”

“All right,” he said with a brief smile. They stayed longer that day due to travel time being nonexistent, then appared back. Sinclair had not mentioned dinner yet, and he was feeling a bit bad about him always paying for expensive meals, so he offered a bit diffidently, “I could cook tonight. I was considering trying lasagne. Doesn’t seem too difficult.”

Sinclair smiled at him and nodded. “That sounds great.”

“I’ll need to go shopping, though,” he said, looking toward the kitchen.

Sinclair took the bento stack from him and bussed it into the kitchen and set it by the sink. “So we go shopping.” An hour later they were back and he started in on the sauce after a quick wash. Sinclair taste-tested every so often and finally gave a decisive nod. “That’s perfect.”

A short time later he had everything assembled and in the oven, so he sat down for a smoke. “I hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

“I’m pretty sure it will,” Sinclair assured him. “I’ve eaten a lot of Italian, after all.”

“Well, if not, I can whip something else up quickly enough,” he said with a shrug. “How old were you when your mother died?”

“Eight. After that my father started chasing the ladies and bringing them home. It was awkward, to say the least. And hurtful. I don’t think he had a clue what to do with a kid, so he more or less ignored me, and finally sent me to live with an aunt in Italy. I discovered the joy of mathematics, became flame-active, got noticed and recruited, rather like you were, though I was fifteen when they found me. That famiglia got wiped out, but by then I’d made plenty of contacts and had a reputation, so I didn’t have any problems.”

“Huh. I’m not Japanese.”

Sinclair aimed a look both of surprise and skepticism his way, but his expression quickly changed to thoughtful. “Someone permanently altered your appearance with magic.”

“Yes. To hide my origins. My parents are still alive last I checked.”

“Were you kidnapped?”

He shook his head. “My parents threw me away like trash right around the time I turned one, thinking I was a squib. Couldn’t have that blight on their reputation,” he said a bit bitterly. “My father shelled out a lot of money for someone to spirit me off, make the changes, and dump me in an orphanage far away. All under vow, of course. They had no idea I have an eidetic memory and would retain everything. The guy also tried to obliviate me, so I couldn’t provide any clues after he dumped me, but, as I later found out, doing that to a child is monumentally stupid and can actually be fatal below a certain age. I retained my memories, but I lost all the emotions they had.”
Sinclair aimed a mildly perplexed look at him.

“I remember everything from the time before they decided I was useless—events, words, emotion-driven responses that went with them—but I can no longer recall the emotions from that time. It’s abstract, the idea of parental love, that kind of thing. I eventually concluded that it stunted my emotional development. In any case, according to the newspapers I finally found in an archive, I died an ‘accidental’ death.”

Sinclair’s expression twisted with anger and not a little revulsion. “I’m surprised you haven’t taken out a hit on them.”

“Who could do it?” he pointed out. “You’ve only met one person with both magic and flames: me. If there are others out there who could handle a contract like that, I don’t know them. So, that’s why I have green eyes, even if they aren’t quite the original colour. And I’m succeeding in spite of all that, so…”

Sinclair shook his head slowly, disbelievingly. “They have no idea what they’ve done.”

He shrugged. “My father is a real asshole. Hopefully he’ll screw up and get himself killed in that little scuffle going on in Britain. Maybe her, too. Don’t imagine I’d lose any sleep if they did.”

“How did they have more children?” Sinclair asked, a slight sneer contorting his upper lip.

“Of course they did,” he replied with a plastic smile. “Daddy is a pure-blood, needs a proper heir. Okay, enough of that. I’m becoming—” He made a face.

Sinclair shook his head again and changed the subject. “Have you ever tried creating something and seeing how long it will last?”

“No. Hm.”

“Hypothetical situation, mostly because I’m curious. You create, say—a cat statue. The target takes it home, sticks it on his mantlepiece. Later that night, or a week later, you alter it from a distance and kill with it, then get rid of it. Possibly not at all useful, but on the other hand, possibly useful if you wanted a senbon death from within.”

He pressed a finger against his lips as he considered it, then materialized a statue of Yori on the table. A minor exertion floated it over to the end of the counter. “I guess we’ll see on the time thing.” His mental alarm went off so he glanced at the clock and got up to check the lasagne. It certainly looked ready, so he shut off the oven and pulled the pan out to set on top.

Sinclair helped by getting plates out, though he paused on realizing there was no such thing as western cutlery in the apartment aside from spoons. “Hm.”

“I’ll materialize utensils,” he said with a shrug. “If I start making stuff like this semi-regularly I guess I could buy some real ones.” He opened a drawer and got out a square-end spatula he could both cut and serve with, then plated two portions. As he brought them to the table Sinclair got drinks. A quick bit of concentration created knives and forks for both of them, and then he sliced into his portion and tried it.

“This is good,” Sinclair declared approvingly.

He thought it tasted pretty good, too, though he might have to experiment a little with the cheese mixture. “I agree. I’m pleased with my first effort. I guess if I made it again I should include some sides.”
Sinclair nodded agreeably. “A salad, maybe some kind of garlic bread. Garlic-roasted asparagus, perhaps, or broccoli. I’m a huge fan of garlic.”

“Well, if you’re awake enough,” he teased, “we could watch a movie after.”

That netted him a sarcastic smile. “You’re so funny. But yes.”

They settled in to watch with a second helping of lasagne, and Sinclair commented, on seeing how the villain was using sand, “I wonder if a Mountain Flame could do something like that.”

“I find movies to sometimes be an inspiration,” he replied.

“You could probably do that, too,” Sinclair pointed out, “even if not in the same inherent manner.”

He eyed the screen doubtfully. “Ano… That would be controlling thousands of individual grains at once. I don’t know.”

“You ever heard of the term ‘chunking’?”

He shot a questioning look Sinclair’s way.

“Okay. It’s a method for remembering things, such as a long series of digits. You obviously don’t need help with memory, but… You normally control six senbon. So, say you grouped grains of sand in batches of six, then grouped those batches by six, and so on. You might be able to control large quantities that way. Or maybe not. Just a theory.”

“It’s a thought,” he allowed. “Never a bad idea to explore what you’re capable of flame-wise, I suppose.” He snorted softly. “If I start with the sand attacks, though, I’d probably end up with yet another name.”

“Hm, I wonder…”

He gave his friend a gentle elbow in the side and gestured at the screen. Sinclair dropped his arm around Hisui’s shoulders and settled back to watch again.

“I like Evelyn,” Sinclair commented as the credits started rolling. “She’s feisty.”

“She’s certainly more brave and reliable than her brother.”

Sinclair nodded and squeezed his arm. “You want help washing up?”

“No, it’s fine. Would you like to take some of the lasagne with you?”

Sinclair hummed appreciatively. “Definitely. It’s never quite as good reheated, but I still enjoy it.” He got up to turn off the machines, so Hisui bussed dishes into the kitchen and rummaged for a container.

As he was placing half of what was left into it Sinclair came up behind him and enfolded him in a hug, placing a kiss right in front of his ear. “Thank you for dinner,” he said softly, then pulled away slowly. “How do you feel about visiting the aquarium here on Saturday—take a break from work?”

He finished packaging the lasagne and closed the container, then turned around with it in his hand. “I’d like that,” he said, and lifted his face slightly so he could plant a butterfly kiss on Sinclair’s lips, then pulled back and offered the leftovers.

Sinclair accepted it with a smile. “Ten o’clock again?”
He nodded. “But—”

Sinclair’s brow furrowed. “But?”

“You have to wear casual clothing.”

Sinclair chuckled. “All right. I feel naked without my gun, but I’ll figure something out that will work.”

Hisui reached over and grabbed Sinclair’s hat, then plopped it in place. “Yori? Leon?” he called.

Yori pranced in with Leon on his back. The chameleon was perched such that his tiny forepaws were on Yori’s neck and head. Sinclair reached down so that Leon could crawl up his arm and onto his shoulder, then he straightened up and said, “Ciao,” before turning to leave.

Hisui followed long enough to secure the door behind him, then went to clean up. “I really want to believe he means it,” he told Yori. “It would be nice. I didn’t think I’d ever want anyone, but he keeps growing on me. And I know he does actually trust me, so that’s a huge point in his favor. He actually makes me feel something other than mild enjoyment.”

They carried on a conversation consisting of words and variously-styled meows while he finished up. Yori seemed to be in favor of it, but he was a cat, and Hisui seriously doubted they viewed things the same way. He gave a fatalistic shrug and went about his evening.

When he opened the door the following Saturday he had to pause. Sinclair was wearing a pair of faded Levi’s, deck shoes, and a pale yellow, short-sleeved button-up shirt that was left untucked. He blinked and stepped back, allowing entry. Sinclair—’Maybe I should start thinking of him by his first name?’ he reflected. ‘We have kissed, after all.’—slipped in and held up another one of those little foil-wrapped boxes.

Hisui closed the door. “I haven’t finished the biscotti yet.”

“Completely different situation,” Renato said with a roll his eyes. “That was an apology gift. These little morsels represent my enduring affection for you.”

His mouth twitched; he accepted the box and laid it on the entry table, then eyed Renato’s outfit again. “You look very nice. Where are you hiding the gun?”

Renato smiled broadly. “I’m going to rely on you to protect me should I get sneak-attacked by enemy mafiosi,” he explained.

‘Okay, that’s kind of a huge neon sign saying he trusts me.’ He checked him over a third time.

“Where’s Leon?”

Leon crawled into view from behind Renato’s neck and blinked a hello at him, then scurried down the length of his owner’s body to get the floor.

“You ready?”

He patted his pocket and nodded. “Maybe I can come up with a way for you to carry concealed even with something like that on,” he mused, then reached for the door.

“That would super cool, actually.”

They spent more than a few hours wandering around enjoying the aquatic life and arguing about
languages, and then bought food from a street vendor to eat on a nearby bench. “You do realize that I don’t have a damn clue about relationships,” he said in between bites of food.

“Well, yes, I had gathered that.”

“You were my first kiss.”

“…Okay, not all that surprising. Now I almost wish I’d made it … more.”

He thought of a half dozen ways to respond to that, but ended up saying, “I enjoyed it.”

“Then I will simply have to give them to you more often,” Renato said silkily.

He shuffled that promise aside in his head and made another casual scan of the area, not that he honestly expected Renato to be attacked by enemy mafiosi, and continued to eat. Perhaps for a side project he could try to figure out how to send a pulse of magic outward to scan for threats. His flames should cover even that use of magic from the eyes of the Mahō-shō, but that assumed he could make it work in the first place. His flames did not seem at all suited for that sort of endeavor, though using them to be able to sense people in general was fairly simple.

They finished up and headed for the station to return to Hisui’s apartment, and arrived in good time. Once inside Renato said, “Got any games we could play?”

He shot him a slightly suspicious look. “Scrabble.”

“…With Roman letters, I hope.”

He nodded. “Kind of hard to have a multi-language game if all you have is kana tiles.”

“Up for a game, then? I don’t want to end my day with you so soon.”

“Sure.” He went to fetch the box for it. Nana had given it to him as a birthday gift one year and, while he almost never used it—because whom did he have to play against?—he somewhat cherished the set because it had come from his friend. He set it up on the coffee table, and saw that Renato had fetched drinks and smoking supplies for them. He then went to get cushions to perch on while his friend got things ready.

Five minutes in Renato asked, “Do you have a passport?”

“…Yes,” he replied, eyeing both the board and his tiles.

“If I invited you to Italy on your break, what would you say?”

“I would say I wonder what you have in mind.”

“Oo, not an immediate no,” Renato marveled. “Touristy things, basically. It can’t hurt for you to get your first taste of Italy with someone who has their home base there and has lived there for years. And to have a companion with you for your first experience with that kind of travel in general.”

“I suppose so,” he said slowly, and placed down tiles.

Renato jotted down the score and examined his own tiles and the board.

“I had every intention of going at some point,” he allowed as he drew.

“Well. Then I am officially inviting you to come on a holiday with me. Short or long, up to you.”
Renato placed his tiles and drew more, then jotted down the score. “And just think,” he purred, “of the glorious biscotti.”

He bit his lip. That was hitting below the belt. But had he not already decided to give this “relationship” a chance? “I have an eight week break, so…” He reached out to bring the biscotti tin to them long enough to get a piece for each of them, and napkins, then sent it back to the kitchen.

“Four weeks?” Renato suggested. “With two weeks to either side here?”

That would not impact his general schedule of jobs, he thought, and placed tiles. Renato had a point. He had never traveled by any method aside from bus or train or cab, and while he was not given to feeling cowardice, the idea was a tiny bit daunting, arranging everything for a trip to a foreign country, alone, though he could have had Daisuke provide advice. “All right.”

Renato restrained himself to a pleased smile and nodded. “I’ll get to work on the arrangements, then.”

“How much experience have you had with magical enclaves?” he asked curiously.

“Just about none,” Renato responded. “When I was trying to figure out the puzzle of your abilities and handsome feline companion, I tapped some resources back in Italy, but I’ve never actually gone to any of those establishments.”

He could hear the silent “why?” tacked onto that statement and obliged, though he had intended to elaborate anyway. “I was wondering if you wanted to visit one. There’s a shopping area in Kyoto. Most of the larger cities have them, though the really big one is in Tokyo. The others are smaller and easier to navigate.”

“I would love to! Do they get all fussy about non-magicals wandering through?”

He shrugged. “Unless someone is waving a wand around it’s sometimes hard to tell who’s magical in the first place, and unlike Britain, most of them don’t wear robes. They wear normal clothing, either Western-style or traditional. Robes are sold as something of a novelty item. I suppose any surprise on your part would be passed off to being a foreigner. I could also check to see what’s available in Italy and maybe we could visit one while there, to see a different take on things. You would have to be with me, though, because non-magicals can’t see the entrances without help. Though once they’ve been to a particular one they might be able to manage it on their own.”

“Not sure I could see myself in a set of robes, anyway,” Renato said.

“They might be de rigueur in Italy for all we know,” he pointed out.

Renato grimaced. “Needs must and all.”

“Can always get you some when we visit around here. We could go tomorrow, or next weekend,” he offered.

“Tomorrow is good.”

He nodded. “Ten o’clock, then. They use normal currency here, but you can’t use something like a credit card. It has to be cash. Strong concentrations of magic can make electronics go weird, though from what I understand there are dampening wards on the outskirts so that the phenomenon doesn’t affect outlying non-magical territory.”

Renato nodded. “Do you keep any of your money in a magical bank? It seems like it’d be a good
way to hide it.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want that kind of presence there. No one has paid any particular attention when I’ve visited—I’m just another face in the crowd—but having an account would create a paper trail of sorts.”

“Understandable.”

Somehow Renato won the game, probably due to his mathematical abilities when it came to calculating the best possible options for word scores. He simply smiled a shade smugly, so at least he was not a vexation-inducing sort of winner. He collected Leon and, when they got to the front door, slowly captured Hisui against the entryway wall between his arms, then leaned in to give him a lingering kiss. When he pulled back his expression was searching, and he leaned in again for a second one.

Hisui felt his head spin a little when Renato gently probed with his tongue. His lips parted and he felt that tongue insinuate itself inside his mouth and start moving. His hands came up to grasp Renato’s forearms as his head tilted back slightly and hit the wall. Parts of him were waking up, physically, emotionally, and it was all a bit confusing for him, but pleasurable indeed.

Renato pulled away again, pressing a gentle, flutty kiss at the corner of his mouth, and said huskily, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Ciao.” And then he was gone.

The next morning Renato was dressed in his customary style, but that was all right. He was greeted with a quick kiss once Renato was inside and given yet another little box. He had been so bemused the night previous that he had yet to open that one. It went on the side table, as usual, and he quickly finished getting ready.

Shortly thereafter he was leading Renato into the shopping district catering to magicals, holding his hand in order to be able to pull him through the protections. Renato was restrained in his reaction, but the widened eyes gave away his interest and excitement. Hisui started at one end and went into any shop of even vague appeal, though he did spend quite a bit of time browsing in a book shop looking for the equivalent of a magical travel guide for Italy, not to mention rune-based enchanting. Renato chose more than a few books for his own consumption.

A relatively quick stop was made at a clothier for a single set of robes for each of them and, as Renato expressed interest in the pet shop, they went in there. Renato spent some time unobtrusively conversing with the chameleons, but was slightly disappointed to find that the most magical thing any of them could do was become invisible in addition to their usual colour-changing antics. “I was kind of hoping they could do something super cool, like change shape or fly or … I don’t know.”

“The shape-changers I’m aware of are nothing you want to mess with,” he replied, and described boggarts to him.

“I’ll pass.”

“It’s unlikely you’ll ever run across one. From what I’ve read they stick to areas with high magical concentrations. For all I know they might simply fall apart if they were without that for any length of time, but I don’t think anyone has ever bothered to do studies. Magicals aren’t exactly the most logical people, or even all that curious,” he said, heading for an eatery.

The fare was not much different from mundane food, though the drinks selection was more varied. They shared a platter of yakitori, and had butterbeer to drink. Someone at some point had migrated the stuff over from Britain. “You would think having magic would be a fertile ground for creativity,”
Renato commented quietly after the server had meandered away.

He shook his head. “They’re generally too set in their ways, though I have a feeling the people here are less stuck in the past, oddly enough. Magic makes everything so damn easy that they feel no particular sense of motivation. I think it’s pathetic. I mostly only visit to keep up with world news and replenish any supplies. Magical culture leans toward teaching indolence, even in this country, unfortunately.”

“So, just another resource, not a way of life,” Renato summarized.

“Right.”

Before Renato left with Leon he was treated to another of those deep, slow kisses, though that time Renato enfolded him in his arms and brought one hand up to the back of his neck. He was left breathless and bizarrely squirmy inside. Once he composed himself he investigated both gift boxes. One held marzipan and the other little chocolates, so he had one of each.

His dreams for the next few days were a confused welter of mingling bodies and unaccustomed longing, which made him less attentive than usual during the day. When Wednesday rolled around Daisuke stopped by.

As he extracted a folder from his briefcase he said, “So… How are you and Sinclair getting on?”

He shot a scowl at his handler. “Fine. He was simply curious, as you conjectured, and he’s been helping me with the gun, doing test fires and helping me get better at using it.”

Daisuke gave him a long, searching look, then nodded and handed over the folder. “Another flame-user.”

He supposed he could understand why the man asked; he was probably looking out for his charge, trying to make sure he wasn’t being taken advantage of or something, or being lured away from Biforcuto. “Awful lot of flame-users lately,” he remarked, then started looking through the material.

“They seem to come in waves,” Daisuke said with a shrug. “Maybe there’s some mystical confluence that makes it more likely during certain conditions.”

The target was another minor, in the next town over from Namimori. She was another that had refused recruitment, in an excessively vulgar manner, but then Storms had a tendency to be hot-tempered, rebellious, and prone to rashness, especially when young. Hisui did not feel any twinges over the idea of taking her out, not after reading the list of murders.

The kid had gone flame-active part way through puberty and had put several people in the hospital, and then started killing. Her flames had manifested under stressful conditions and left her victims looking like the after-shots of people caught in violent sand storms, as if their skin had been scoured off, though it was simply the disintegration attribute at work.

He absolutely hated the idea that someone like that was so close to Nana. “I’ll do it,” he said, pushing the folder back. ‘And maybe visit Namimori since I’ll be so close by.’

Daisuke secured it and pulled out a small case about the same dimensions as a folder, though much thicker. “Real ammunition, as well as more plastic bullets. I don’t expect you’ll need more real ones for a long time, but let me know.”

He nodded. “I don’t, either. There’s very little point in wasting any.”
“All right.”

Daisuke got up and departed, so Hisui reached out to flip the deadbolt. He was contemplating how to do the hit when three lazy knocks jolted him back to full awareness. He rose and went to answer the door. Renato was there, smiling charmingly at him. “Eh?”

Renato slipped in and secured the door, then stole a quick kiss. “I just couldn’t stay away, tesoro,” he said dramatically, hand splayed over his heart.

He blinked. ‘Since when did we move along to terms of endearment? Am I supposed to reciprocate with Ren-koi?’

“My heart aches when we’re apart for too long,” Renato added desolately.

“Are you drunk?”

Renato snorted and gave him a wounded look. “Hardly. I’m just happy to see you, even if I was impolite enough not to give you any warning. I saw your contact on my way up. He didn’t see me, though, because I’m just that good. Another job?”

He eyed his friend—boyfriend?—and said, “You couldn’t have missed me that much.”

“I did,” Renato insisted, then produced another foil-wrapped box.

He sighed and accepted it, then went to sit on the couch. Renato joined him and slung an arm around his shoulders.

“Yes,” he replied to the earlier question, bringing over the smoking supplies. “I’ll take care of it this weekend.”

Renato paused with the lighter half way to his cigarette. “You’re going away?”

“Only for a day.” He opened the box against custom and found truffles inside, so he plucked one out and closed the box again, setting it aside. “And no, you can’t come. I had planned to see my friend after, since she’ll be within a reasonable distance.”

“Ah. You don’t want her reporting back your mysterious friend to her husband and him being clued in to a connection to the mafia if she describes me well enough.”

He nodded. “Of course, my luck may be elsewhere this time and he might be there, which would mean having to—” He shuddered.

“Be social like a normal person?” Renato teased.

He scowled and bit off half the truffle, then blinked slowly in pleasure at the taste.

“I’m starting to see how to get you to attack me with wanton abandon,” Renato said teasingly. “I’ll just coat myself in good-quality chocolate and offer myself up as a sacrifice to love.”

He snorted in laughter, unable to help himself. “You are shameless,” he said, and ate the other half.

“Only around you.”

“So we’re a couple now,” he stated, reaching for a cigarette.

“…Yes.” There was amusement and bemusement laced into that single word.
He lit up and took a drag, exhaling slowly. “If I ever catch you messing around with someone else, you won’t live to regret it.”

“Never gonna happen,” Renato said with such firmness and confidence that Hisui felt he could believe it.

He nodded and said, “I am feeling lazy tonight. I don’t really want to cook.”

“That Chinese place delivers. How about I order from there and we can watch bad TV together.”

“Sure.” They discussed what to get for a minute, then Renato got out his cell and made a call. Hisui went into the kitchen to get hashi, napkins, and drinks, then turned on the television and started browsing the channels. He found a rerun marathon of Takeshi’s Castle and settled on that.

Twenty minutes later the doorbell chimed and Renato got up to get the food, then hastened back to the couch. Hisui stopped him before he set the bag down and reached up under the edge of the table. He pushed the table surface up, then pulled it toward him.

Renato blinked and twisted down so he could examine it. “I had no idea the damn thing was on hinges. Why didn’t you do that last time?”

“We were using plates.”

Renato shrugged, sat down, and slid over, then unpacked the bag and set it aside. After a quick investigation they each had their preferred form of sustenance for the evening and went back to watching the hilariously awful game show.

Renato gave him another of those dizzying kisses before he left, and he was visibly reluctant to leave, but go he did. When Hisui finally made it into the kitchen to clean up he noticed that a phone number had been stuck to his refrigerator with a magnet. ‘A nudge to call after I return?’ he wondered.

The next day after classes he again considered the issue of the hit as he tapped out an assignment on his laptop. She was torturing people to death, essentially. After he finished and closed the machine, he slid it into his bag and turned to the issue of Renato being able to carry concealed without needing to wear a jacket. ‘Actually, how does he even get that thing through security measures? Well, he did say he was really good at going unseen.’

Anything he could think of offhand would still, even if carved with runes to make the eye not see the holster, leave a negative impression on his clothing, and people might notice that. It was while he was checking his magical supplies that he began to consider some kind of tricked-up enchanted pouch, except not in the form of a pouch. He shook his head. Renato didn’t have the magic required to use one, not that he could tell, and he had never heard of a magical battery. Runes could be powered by ambient magic, but…

He bought a ticket to Namimori on Saturday, and shortly before the train approached the stop for his target’s location he disillusioned himself in a blind spot and disembarked when the doors opened, then tracked down his target. She was alone (thankfully, or he would have had to come back later) and in a fine froth of anger, walking in circles and swearing vengeance on some girl. Hisui compressed her to nothingness; just another rebellious teen runaway.

Apparation to a safe spot in Namimori followed, and he appeared in the station a short time later, right as the train arrived, and blended into the crowd. Once outside again he headed for an estate agent to browse through potential properties in town, to get a feel for the kind of money he would
have to fork over, then found a public phone and called Nana.

“Hisui-kun!” she said happily.

“Hey. I’m in town. Checked on a few things. You have time for a visit?”

“Of course I do! Come right over, okay?”

“See you soon.”

He walked to her house, hands shoved in his pockets, and rang the doorbell. Nana ushered him in with a wide smile and hustled him off to the kitchen. It took a moment for his brain to catch up to that whole part where she was expecting. “Wow,” he said.

She glanced down and touched her stomach. “Mm. Getting real big. It’s almost time for lunch.”

He tilted his head. “Maybe I should cook for you.”

Nana laughed. “You’re so silly. I have so few opportunities to cook for you, so you sit right down and let me do the work.”

“If you’re sure…”

She nodded sharply and got him a soft drink, then started working, so he took a seat at the table. “Maybe at some point I should tease you by calling you Mama.”

She giggled. “Just for that, if I have a girl, I’m going to call her Midori, after you.”

He snorted. “I still think they were being lazy when they named me. Anyway, you’ll be happy to know I made a friend.”

She gasped and aimed wide eyes at him over her shoulder, then got back to work.

“And, yes, I know. It’s only taken how many years?”

She giggled. “I’m so happy. I keep telling you what a wonderful person you are. And now you have an additional friend. So who is this mystery person?”

“I met him while I was delivering a job. He was interested in the whole thing.” ‘That’s sort of the truth,’ he thought.

“He likes languages, too?”

“Yeah, so we have something in common. It’s, well—it’s nice.”

“Mm, is he at the university?”

“No. It was just chance we met. He’s a bit outrageous at times, but I like spending time with him.”

“Do you have a crush?” she sing-songed.

“What?” He aimed a disbelieving look at her.

“Hisui-kun, you have never once looked at a girl. Is it really so strange for me to ask?” She glanced back over her shoulder and giggled at the look on his face. “You don’t have to say,” she assured him, “but I think it would be sweet.”
‘Okay, good to know,’ he thought, wondering when the hell Nana had become that perceptive. Then again, they had known each other almost their entire lives.

She left off what she was doing and grabbed some dishes down from the cupboard and some hashi and rests from a drawer and got them ready, then checked the rice cooker. “Almost done!” she announced, then went back to the stove. Two minutes later she slid the food onto the table and got herself a drink, then sat down.

“Lovely as always,” he said after his first bite.

They ate for a minute in silence, then she asked, “What were you checking on?”

“Oh, housing prices around here, just to get an idea. I’ve been saving up, so… No harm in checking. I could have just called, I suppose.”

“But then you couldn’t have come to see me.”

He nodded. “Not that I need an excuse.”

“You don’t,” she agreed.

He went on alert when he heard the front door open and close, and footsteps coming down the hall. Sawada entered the kitchen a moment later and beamed at Nana, who rose to greet him before hustling him to a seat.

“The food is still warm! Let me get you some,” she said, then hastened to do just that. When she slid the new dish onto the table she paused, looking between them. “Oh my, I forgot. Hisui-kun, you had to hurry back, didn’t you, and weren’t able to stay for the reception.” She made introductions and sat back down, telling Sawada, “You remember me telling you about Hisui-kun. He was in town checking on real estate.”

Sawada eyed him, then smiled broadly. “So you’re the one who’s kept my Nana-chan safe all these years!”

He nodded. He could almost see a sharp edge to that smile. “Friends do that,” he said evenly.

“So, you attend Kyoto University? Very prestigious,” Sawada commented.

“I worked hard to be accepted.”

“You’re too modest,” Nana said. “You could have gone to the University of Tokyo if you wanted to.”

He shook his head. “Too far away, but I did take a look when I visited there last year on summer break. I’m happy in Kyoto.”

“What are you going to do this year, then?” she asked.

“My friend and I are going to Italy. You had such good things to say about it, after all.”

A mischievous smile appeared on her face. “I see.”

He rolled his eyes slightly. “Don’t start. I was tempted with biscotti.”

Nana giggled madly. “It is good! Have you tried making it?”
He shook his head. “I did make lasagne, though, after going to an Italian restaurant. I wasn’t one hundred percent satisfied with it, but I think with a little tweaking of the filling it would be perfect.”

“Well, if you’re going to visit Italy, you’ll get a much better idea,” Sawada said. “It’s never quite the same at a restaurant in a different country.”

“A fair point,” he allowed. “I also tried French and Thai.”

Nana gave him another wide-eyed look. “Your friend is a miracle worker!”

He scowled at her. “You make it sound like I’m—I don’t know—hopeless or something.”

“Obviously not,” she replied tartly, “if your friend can manage to get you into foreign restaurants and not have to drag you there. Oh, you’re going to have so much fun on your trip! It’s very pretty there.”

“I can only hope, based on the pictures I’ve seen.”

Sawada remained mostly quiet for the remainder of the time he was there, but Hisui could see that the man was carefully observing as he and Nana continued talking. He begged off after that, still not feeling all that comfortable around Sawada, and caught a train home.
He realized after the fact that there was no evidence of the hit and gave Daisuke a call to request a visit, as it was not the kind of thing you spoke of on the phone. Once he was there Hisui explained the situation and was assured it would be fine after a missing persons report was filed. It was around five when Daisuke left so he gave Renato a call to let him know he was back safe.

That, of course, resulted in Renato angling for an invite, which he gave. Renato showed up with his usual gift and gave him a soft kiss in greeting. “Ciao! How was your friend?”

“She was fine,” he said, then scowled. “Her husband showed up part way into lunch. He seemed hyper-aware at first, but relaxed a bit after a while. Pretty sure I won’t have to dodge any assassins in the near future.”

“That’s good. I’d hate to have kill your friend’s husband in retaliation,” Renato said, then wrapped an arm around him and ushered him off toward the couch.

“You’re being pushy again,” he complained. “I was surprised to see how far along she is, though considering she already told me the expected due date I’m not sure why.” Once they were seated he added, “She seems to think I have a crush on you.”

Renato brows went up as set the box down. “What on Earth did you say to her?”

“That I liked spending time with you.”

Renato tilted his head to the side and considered that, then nodded. “I suppose I can see why she had the thought. I assume the job went well.”

“Yes. One fewer psycho on the streets. No real progress on that little project, though. Some magical things can be used by you, but what I thought of so far, not so much. I’ll have to do some more research.”

Renato shook his head slightly. “It would be super cool if you can figure it out, but if not, don’t stress over it.”

“I don’t think I have a crush.”

Renato eyed him in amusement. “What do you think it is, then?”

“I like you.”

Renato nodded, then gave him a sly smile. “Do you like me enough to let me ravish your delectable mouth?”

He stared. “Fine.”

Renato looked slightly taken aback, and he realized he had used a word of assent that generally meant he was uncomfortable to some extent. So he leaned in to initiate a kiss for the second time in their relationship. The next thing he knew he was laid out on the sofa and being kissed passionately, making his head swim and the rest of him come alive.

Sounds were coming from his throat that would be highly embarrassing if he were in a more rational
state of mind. His skin tingled where Renato’s form was pressed up against him and it seemed like half his body was blushing from the sense of heat he could feel. His head went back when Renato moved away from his mouth to nibble his jawline on the way to his neck and murmur in his ear in Italian between kisses and nips.

Hisui simply was not used to feeling so much emotion so strongly, and shortly after Renato reclaimed his mouth his whole body stiffened up and he exploded in a way. His heart was racing a mile a minute and he could no longer breathe right. Renato pulled away slightly and kissed the corners of his mouth softly, then his eyelids. “I like you,” was whispered in his ear.

As his brain stopped melting and started to firm up again he found it within himself to wonder if that was meant in the Japanese way or some other. “I like you, too,” he whispered back, resolving to give a damn about the distinction some other time. His eyes slid open half way to see a tender expression on Renato’s face. He lifted his head to give him a little kiss, then paused. “Ano… I need to go clean up.”

Renato nodded and slowly pulled away. “Okay.”

He got up a little unsteadily and wandered off to shower and change clothes. When he returned Renato was watching television with Yori and Leon, but he looked over with a breathtaking smile and patted the back of the couch in invitation. He sat down and was immediately pulled closer and handed a napkin with a piece of biscotti on it.

He blinked at the offering and accepted it. “Thank you,” he said, then took a bite.

“So, since you were out on a job today, would you like to do some practice tomorrow instead?”

He paused mid-chew and looked over inquiringly.

“Could work on speed, or aim, or even messing around with some sand. Whatever comes to mind, basically. I like spending time with you. Doesn’t matter doing what.” Renato gestured at the TV. “Even watching bad Japanese game shows.”

He resumed chewing with a small smile, and swallowed. “I … really enjoyed that,” he said quietly.

“Let’s do it again sometime. Oh, I’ve made the arrangements for our flights, but I forgot to bring over the itinerary. I can do that tomorrow. And if you want to see any place in particular it’ll give me a chance to ensure reservations at hotels.”

“I would prefer to mostly stay away from anything overtly mafia-related.”

Renato nodded. “Not a problem. It’s a holiday, after all, not a meet and greet.”

“There’s a magical enclave in Genoa, so we should go there, take a look.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised you didn’t say Rome,” Renato said dryly.

He scoffed. “Mm, I don’t think magicals are all that comfortable with camping out right next to the Pope.”

Renato snickered. When it got late he reluctantly got up and looked around for Leon, who had gone off again somewhere with Yori, then gave Hisui a lingering kiss at the door. But before he could actually leave Hisui slipped a key into his hand.

“What’s this?” Renato asked, staring down at his hand in bemusement.
He frowned. “Are you blind?”

“Oo, with this I could sneak in at night and do such wicked things to you,” Renato said with a dreamy smile.

“You make all this sound like one of those cliché manga story lines,” he complained.

Renato gave him a skeptical look. “You read manga?”

“No. But I sure as hell overhear enough about it from giggly girls between classes.”

Renato chuckled, gave him another kiss, and said, “Ten o’clock,” then left.

He investigated that evening’s gift and found it contained four chocolate-dipped strawberries. He was in such an indulgent mood he ate all of them, then went to plan the next day’s lunch.

The next afternoon Renato laid the flight information on the table and shoved it over, then spread out a map. “I was thinking we could go here,” he said, tapping a number of spots in succession. “Spend a few days in each.”

“Sure,” he said agreeably. They would be flying in and out of Milan.

“I’ll arrange for a rental car to be waiting at the airport, so that won’t be an issue.” Renato proceeded to give him an idea of what could be expected in the way of interest in each of the locations, plus the surrounding territory, with Hisui taking careful mental notes. Renato ravaged him against the front door before he left, with a promise to see him on Saturday for another round of practice and brainstorming.

He snapped out of a daydream half way through a lecture on Arabic and nearly blushed. He had drifted off into thinking about Renato’s mouth on his like one of those giggly girls in high school in the throes of a crush. He face-palmed, ignoring that his nearest seat partner was giving him a bewildered look. Maybe he should just fling some liquid chocolate at Renato as an excuse and jump him. Surely his lover would get the hint? Or he could just come right out and say he wanted … more. He wasn’t any good at this kind of thing!

He scowled at his seat partner for looking at him funny and tried to appear interested in listening to something he had read about and memorized weeks ago. He never used to have feelings like this!

His thoughts paused, his gaze sliding off to the side. That was a good thing, wasn’t it? Maybe the damage from all those years ago was—well, not being repaired, but…

He snorted. That sounded like some horribly cliché story where love conquered all. ‘Kami-sama, I could really use a cigarette right about now.’ He glanced at the clock and sighed. Five minutes later it occurred to him that Renato had Sun Flames. Were they having some kind of effect on him, even inadvertently? Or as some subconscious initiative on Renato’s part?

‘Should I really be fucking analyzing this?’ he thought irritably. ‘Screw the potential reason. If I want more, I should say so! Who the hell cares why?’

He was out of his seat like a shot when the lecture ended and quickly made it to his usual spot for apparation. He was home seconds later and lighting up, thrilled beyond measure that it had been his last class for the day and he could fume in peace. Yori meowed curiously at him, so he said, “I think I want to have sex.”

Yori’s tail curved into a question mark.
“I know, it’s not like I’ve ever given a damn before.”

The vocalization Yori made was the same one he used as a greeting for Hisui’s lover.

“Of course with Renato!”

Yori paced over to the phone and looked up at it pointedly.

“Yeah, yeah. You just want to see Leon again.”

How a cat managed to make that face was beyond him.

“Oh, fine,” he drawled. “I’ll have my lover over and you can see yours.”

With a smug flip of his tail, Yori stalked off.

“I think I just lost an argument with my cat, somehow,” he muttered as he stubbed out his cigarette. Renato answered on the second ring and promised to be over shortly, so he went and took a shower.

When he exited the bathroom Renato was having a conversation with the pets. He looked up and smiled warmly, then hastened over, reaching up to play with Hisui’s hair. “I just realized how long it’s getting.”

“I want to have sex,” he said.

Renato was stronger than he looked—or he was cheating with Sun Flames—because after a blink of surprise he picked Hisui up as if he weighed nothing, carried him off to the bedroom, and deposited him on the bed. Seconds later he was on his back and looking up at Renato’s face.

“I was expecting we’d be taking things a tiny bit slower than that,” Renato commented.

“You don’t want to?”

“Of course I want to,” Renato purred with a leer. “I’ve wanted to from the moment I saw you. I just didn’t expect you to jump from delectable kissing to wanting to make love so quickly.” He took one of Hisui’s hands and gently laved a finger with his tongue. “There’s a lot to be learned, you know.‘

‘Kami-sama. Who knew my fingers were so…’

“There’s so much of you to appreciate,” Renato continued, then ran his tongue up the inside of Hisui’s wrist. Nimble fingers undid the shirt he had tossed on and that mouth moved to roam over his chest.

He rather lost track of what was going on for a while, until that soft, warm tongue was on his cock. His eyes rolled back even though they were closed, and his hips lifted of their own accord. He felt a hand press down at his hip, restraining him gently, then ghost over to hold him. ‘Oh,’ he thought, but it came out as a long, low moan. Before he knew it he was exploding again, right into Renato’s mouth.

A short time later the corner of his mouth was being kissed, but he reached up to turn it into a real one before saying, “What about you?”

Renato pulled back a little and smirked. “I’m all yours, tesoro, if you want to try.”

He nodded after a second, and Renato pulled away to lie down next to him, angling his head to give him a look. He rolled onto his side, then moved to hover over his lover, and tried to mimic the basics
of what he remembered Renato doing. But he realized quickly that he needed to listen, to take into account how Renato was reacting—sounds, the way he breathed, or moved.

He shuffled that off to the side in his head and moved lower. ‘Okay,’ he thought some time later. ‘Swallowing is a good idea.’

Renato managed a weak chuckle and pulled him up into a kiss. “Didn’t think of that, huh?” he murmured.

“Shut up.”

“So what would you like to do Saturday?” Renato inquired, shifting Hisui so he was cradled along his side.

“Ano… I think I’d like to try controlling more senbon at once. I’m already so familiar with them that if I get the concept down with that…”

“Sounds reasonable. Hm.”

“What?”

“I was wondering how well you could move other people about. I assume you can fly.”

“Yes, and I don’t know. We could try it. But don’t get too upset if I drop you a few times.”

Renato snorted softly. “So long as any damage is minimal I can jump-start my regeneration and heal myself pretty quickly, remember?” Then he let out a long, low chuckle. “And give myself *amazing* stamina.”

They were lounging on the window seat of the room they had rented the night previous when the attack started. Genoa’s magical shopping enclave was pretty and old world, and not discordantly different in appearance from the older mundane areas, though without the trappings of modern society. The cigarette in Hisui’s hand trembled and dropped ash as he watched a score of masked, black-cloaked people arrive, led by a bare-faced, robed man, and start to send violent spells at those down on the street.

“Shit. Stay here, Ren-koi. Shoot out the window if you must, but don’t leave the damn room,” he said, then disillusioned himself and flew off, higher up, so he could get a better view of the fight. When he heard someone scream “Death Eaters” he knew what they were dealing with. Never having seen one, not even in one of the newspapers, it was no surprise he had been clueless until that moment.

He materialized two dozen senbon, his current limit, and sent them flying, six headed for the leader and the others targeting those nearest him. Before they went down he was planning out who to send them through after, though he could see that Renato was picking people off with startling speed and accuracy. Several got away, which was unfortunate, but that could not be helped. He released his senbon and returned to the room, dropping the spell.

Renato didn’t so much as twitch. He angled the cigarette in his mouth to the side and said, “The leader. He disintegrated.”

“…So it was him? I wondered when I got a better look at him.”
Renato nodded and stood up. “I’m thinking we should probably make ourselves scarce.”

“I agree. I can disillusion us and apparate to the parking garage. We can head off to our next stop early?”

“Yeah.” Renato took a last drag and stubbed out his cigarette.

Ten minutes later they were driving away. “I wonder…”

“Recruiting, you think?” Renato asked. “He’s already been traipsing all over France from what I’ve heard. Maybe he comes in with his bunch, terrorizes the local populace, then leaves them there to start forcibly recruiting while he takes another bunch elsewhere to do the same?”

“And Italy is right next door, so to speak. He disintegrated? What the hell does that mean?”

Renato gave him a quick look, then concentrated on the road again. “You seemed restless earlier after we got up, uneasy.”

He frowned in thought and stared sightlessly out the window. “Yeah, I guess I was. Where are you going with this?”

“I’m not sure yet, but when I figure it out I’ll let you know.”

“It sounds pathetic that he has to keep recruiting in other countries,” he remarked. “He and his people aren’t even strong enough to handle the situation. Either there are some excellent combatants in Britain on the side of so-called good or his value as a strategist is abysmal.”

“Hopefully the bastard will stay out of Asia, and away from anything outside Britain aside from magical enclaves. If he can’t even subdue one country…”

They ran into Renato’s friend Shamal in Pavia, where he was working on his degree. He seemed both lazy and hyper to Hisui. The only time he seemed to calm down was when there were no women around (younger ones, anyway) or he was in classes (or so he heard). They were meandering down a street window shopping when Renato laid a hand on his arm and gestured with the other.

“That’s Shamal,” he said with amused resignation, indicating a dark-haired man flitting from woman to woman.

“He’s like a hummingbird.”


Shamal froze mid-pucker and then pivoted, the woman he was after forgotten. “Renato,” he said. He quick-stepped over and eyed Hisui avidly, then deflated. “Oh. Who’s this?”

‘Did he think I was a flat-chested woman or something?’ “Hisui, Renato’s lover,” he replied.

Shamal blinked. “I had no idea you leaned that way.”

Renato scoffed. “I know a priceless treasure when I see one.”

“So, uh, how did you two meet?” Shamal asked, looking at them with a faintly puzzled expression.

Renato looked sidelong at Hisui, smirk firmly in place, then said, “We bumped into each other at a hotel bar. Kept running into each other after that—it was like fate.”

“More like stalking,” he muttered.
“You did allow me to catch you,” Renato pointed out.

“Wow,” Shamal said wonderingly. “Let’s go get something to eat and talk!”

Hisui allowed Renato to order for him, because he was certain his lover knew his tastes well enough by then that he would pick something new for him to enjoy. That way he could concentrate on puzzling out this friend, a man who seemed to think if he just tried a little harder he could love and keep all the women in the world at once, or at least large numbers of them at a time. How he managed to concentrate enough to get through his studies was simply not something Hisui’s brain could compute.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Shamal aimed his way.

“Not usually, but I make an exception for people I don’t dislike.”

“Odd way to word it.”

He shrugged and sipped his wine, then set the glass aside when the server arrived with their meals.

“So, tell me about the man who’s captured Renato’s heart,” Shamal prompted, cutting into his veal and then giving a little moan after tasting it.

“I am a student of Linguistics, translator, and formerly a cook.”

Shamal did a double-take. “Cook? Renato? You bagged a cook?”

Hisui furrowed his brow and started contemplating malicious spells to put to use.

“Are you any good? Because I could see going for a man if he was an exceptional cook. Maybe. You look girly enough. I could deal. Briefly.”

His brows drew down to frightening depths. “You did not mention he was so … impolite.”

“Now, now,” Renato said, reaching over to stroke the back of his neck for a moment. “I know what that word means.”

He favored his lover with a plastic smile and considered shooting an impotence spell under the table.

Shamal looked between them. “What on Earth are you talking about?”

“Yes, it was … shocking,” Renato said, then changed the subject.
‘I’m starting to not care if people know,’ he thought, ‘but I still have plenty of school left. Last thing I want is to be inundated with a bunch of offers. Maybe they’d let me speed up a mastery or even a doctorate? If I could get through those in half the time…’

Shamal took off outside the restaurant, after an open offer to meet up again while they were in town. While the two of them were moving along to investigate the next vendor’s goods a man eased on up casually and eyed Renato. Hisui was given a quick, dismissive glance. The man pulled an envelope from his pocket and showed it to Renato.

Hisui found it puzzling simply for the fact that it had brilliant orange flames emanating from a wax seal on the back flap. None of the people on the street gave it so much as a second look.

Renato made an annoyed sound after a glance. He turned to Hisui and murmured, “Give me a minute?”

He nodded and watched as his lover moved away with the man to a spot not far distant, and leaned up against the nearby wall to wait.

A minute or so later he saw Renato hold up a finger, then head his way. He said quietly, “Job offer. I should have known they’d notice I was in the country. How upset do you think your friend would be if you took on a job through someone else? Because this is a two-man job and I think it’d be fantastic for us to do one together. But it’s your break, and you—”

He silenced him with a quick press of a finger to his lips. “Depends on who it is, I suppose.”

“The Vongola. Seems after that attempted coup d’état the boss is looking for potential non-Varia hitmen he can trust with certain things. This is a major opportunity and I’m reluctant to dismiss it out of hand.”

“And if I say yes, that means my identity gets out,” he murmured, and hummed thoughtfully. “You said the Vongola is mostly upright.”

Renato nodded. “And Biforcuto might not be allied with them, but neither are they enemies.”

“This guy even going to take me seriously?”

“He will if I point out that you’re Phantom.”

He snorted at that name. It was a lot sooner than he had wanted, but… It was not a bad idea to make contacts within the Vongola, not with his long-term future in mind. “I hope whatever job it is doesn’t push any of my negatives,” he said with a shrug, then cast a little spell that would blur his appearance in the contact’s memory. He had no particular skill with magical illusions aside from disillusionment, but the spell he used was something of a hybrid between charms and mind magic, something he had learned on whim one day with the idea of using it someday for the purposes of infiltration. It wasn’t very strong, but hopefully it would keep him as something of a mystery.

If they had people out reporting when freelancers were moving around the country, they might actually have photographs of him in Renato’s company, which was annoying. He would have to see about making some alterations to the airline records and use a few more spells to make the staff on their way back not object to the alteration of name he was already planning to enact. “Okay, let’s go talk to the man.”

The man in question, one Antonio Labriola, was visibly unhappy at first on seeing Renato bring his companion with him, but after Hisui was introduced as “Phantom” his expression slid into curiosity. The three of them found a spot to sit down and Antonio offered the envelope again.
Renato opened it and held the letter between them. Prostitution ring on Vongola territory, with unwilling goods. The job was to take out the people involved, then alert their contact once they were dead. A Vongola clean-up crew would descend to both sanitize the site and get the victims to safety and provide medical care. The pay was a little low considering, but he likened it to the first job he had ever been offered, how it was a test, and paid out accordingly. He nodded and looked at Renato, who also nodded.

“He wants it done quiet,” Antonio said. “On completion you’ll be given a key for a temporary holding account.”

He almost pointed out that they could “sanitize” certain things themselves, but checked himself when he realized they would want proof of sorts and an idea of how they worked. That limited his options slightly—no (de)compression, for example—but he would be fine using senbon. He had already carved runes into Renato’s favored gun to negate the sound it made on firing, to obviate the use of a suppressor, though he had to charge the runes personally every so often. It was the kind of thing that made him wonder if flames could be used to do the charging, but had yet to get around to designing a test case. If that worked, perhaps he could make progress on concealed carry for his lover.

Antonio set a small case he had with him on the table and turned it sideways, then opened it. From it he extracted various papers, amongst them blueprints for the building they’d be entering. Hisui took those to burn into memory, then traded with Renato so he could look over the hit list. Men, twenty of them—cooks, handlers, facilitators—all involved in kidnapping people to be chained in rooms for the sexual pleasure of people who liked to buy a fantasy.

“Time frame?” Renato asked.

“As soon as possible,” Antonio said.

“Not a problem,” Hisui replied. “It’ll be done before you know it.”

Antonio produced a business card with his name and number on it for them. “Excellent. I’ll expect to hear from you soon.”

Once he was gone they resumed window shopping on the way back to their room, then settled in for a discussion. “Let me check those runes,” he started with, and Renato handed over his gun. He felt up the carvings while smirking at his lover, pushing magic into them, then handed it back.

“All charged up and raring to go?”

He smiled. “So, twenty men. When do you want to go in?”

“Daytime. They don’t open for ‘business’ until eight. That gives us plenty of time during the day. Perhaps eight in the morning? Three floors. We can split up or take each floor together.”

“The Vongola has an interesting way of sealing documents,” he commented, thinking about scenarios first.

“Yes. It’s impossible to fake so far as I know. Sky flames like that…”

“How about we do the ground floor together, then split for the final two. I can make it to the second floor very quickly, so we would be hitting them at roughly the same time.”

Renato nodded. “Sounds reasonable. So, a day’s stakeout first, then move in the morning after?”

“Sure.”
“All charged up and raring to go?” Renato repeated.

“Yes. So get over here.”

The spent part of the evening spying on the building from the safety of disillusionment and a handy, decorative balcony on a nearby building, then returned the next morning to continue. Things settled down at around four o’clock in the morning, so in theory the inhabitants would be asleep when they planned to go in, assuming an hour or two for aftermath care.

They spent the afternoon enjoying the city, had a wonderful meal at the hotel that evening, and retired for the night. The next morning they were back at the site and entering noiselessly from a back door that Hisui unlocked with his flames. They stood there in the small entry room, silently, as he reached out with his Earth Flames for the gravitational disturbances caused by people.

“There are three people,” he whispered into Renato’s ear, “off in that room.” He pointed through the arch into the kitchen at a door off in the corner. “Two in the reception room, probably passed out from too much alcohol given the way they’re positioned. First floor has twelve people. The rest are on the second floor.”

Renato nodded slightly and turned his head so he could whisper back. “Get the reception room, then head up. I’ll take the three in here and move to my floor.”

He nodded and ghosted off to the reception room, preparing senbon along the way. Two of the decadent sofas in there had men sprawled on them. One was drooling, his saliva dripping down to the crack between the arm and the cushion. He grimaced and sent his weapons flying in the usual pattern. That sofa had just gotten a lot more messed up with bodily fluids.

He released the senbon and created new ones so that no blood would transfer, and sped off into the entrance hall and up the stairs. His floor had five victims—three women and two men—as well as eight of the targets. He took care of them dispassionately and quickly, then returned to the ground floor.

Renato joined him just a minute later and jerked his head toward the kitchen. They ghosted off and exited the building, then made their way to a much busier street, where Renato got out his phone and made the call. Once he was done he said, “See, this is why having a cell phone is so handy.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure, whatever.”

“Great! I know just the model I plan to get you,” Renato said happily. “Wait here a second,” he said, then ducked into a shop and returned with coffee, a soft drink, and a bag of cornettos.

Hisui nodded in appreciation and found a shaded bench for them to sit on, then sat back to have a snack. An hour later Antonio strolled into the area, spotted them, and wandered over to offer a card. Hisui had a free hand so he accepted it and took in the information with a glance, then tucked it into Renato’s breast pocket.

“Nice job,” Antonio complimented. “Clean, quiet. There a number we can reach you at?”

Renato fetched out a card and handed it over. “For now, both of us. I plan to convince my friend here of the wonders of mobile phones.”

He sighed and sipped his drink.

“Excellent. I’m sure we’ll be speaking again.” Antonio gave them a nod and slipped away.
“Sure,” he muttered.

Renato finished up his snack and they returned to their holiday activities. They were in Cremona when a call came in on Renato’s phone. “Hold that thought,” he said and hit mute, then said, “Labriola. You up for another one?”

“That was quick,” he commented. “Sure.”

Renato nodded and had a quick exchange with Antonio, then hung up and tucked the phone away. “We’ll meet him in two hours. They probably want another look before we fly out. I’m sure someone there has already tracked down our flight information.”

“Yeah, about that…”

They rendezvoused at a park, seated at a table beneath the sheltering branches of a large tree. “Rivals trying to move in,” Antonio opened with after a greeting. “Seem to think starting a drug trade here would be just the thing, and that we wouldn’t notice.” He opened his little briefcase and produced another of those Sky Flame-sealed envelopes to hand over.

Renato opened it and shared it between them. The Vongola Nono wanted all but one of them killed, and for a statement to be made. Hisui pressed a finger against his lower lip as he read. ‘I can certainly do messy, and if Renato goes for the head…‘ He also noticed the fee had gone up by a fair amount per target. He nodded slightly at his lover and popped a grape in his mouth.

Two days later they were at the site and acting. Hisui plastered one of the targets against the ceiling and wrapped a temporary obsidian blindfold around the guy’s eyes, then they took aim. Renato was using explosive bullets, and he was decompressing heads. The blinded fellow could hear all of his buddies dying and would shortly see just what had happened, and hopefully get the message and bring it back to the others in his famiglia.

They retreated a bit to make the call, then stuck around under disillusionment to see how it played out. As soon as his gravitational net sensed the Vongola team approaching Hisui released the captive. A set of binoculars allowed him to see the guy tumble to the floor and cradle his side, then slowly recover and look around at the carnage. Less than a minute later the Vongola swept in. The rival took one look at them and fled.

An hour later the call came in, so they met up at an outdoor café. Hisui was enjoying a ham and cheese panino when Antonio claimed a seat. “Nice,” he said, and slid over another card.

Hisui took in the contents at a glance before Renato picked it up to tuck away.

“I understand you two will be returning to Japan soon,” Antonio commented. “If it should come up, will you be available to handle any jobs that way?”

Renato nodded straight off. Hisui, however, said, “Assuming targets richly deserve to die, yes. I don’t go after petty thugs.”

“Ah, yes, we did a little checking,” Antonio replied. “We have a very good idea of what you’ll go for.”

“Then yes, so long as it doesn’t interfere with my schedule.”

“Excellent. We’ll be in touch.”

The remainder of their time in Italy was quiet, and Hisui amassed a number of cookbooks to later
investigate, a handful of souvenirs to display in his apartment, and rather too much double chocolate biscotti.

On the off chance that he would need it, after they returned, he visited Renato’s apartment and chose an apparition location. Renato was fine with the idea of having any Vongola contacts go there if necessary, rather than intruding on Hisui’s home. He would have warded the place against electronic spies, but there was still the issue of a lack of ambient magic.

Renato bought him a cell phone and took great delight in teaching him how to use it. He was just showing him how to text when the doorbell rang and Yori chirred in a “Daisuke” way. Hisui reached out to open the door to let him in, and nodded when Daisuke settled into the side chair.

“So, how was your trip?”

He looked away from the phone. “It was educational.”

“ Heard some rumors.”

He gave Daisuke a flat look. “That was so subtle I could barely comprehend what you were hinting at. Yes, I helped do a few jobs for the Vongola.” He accepted a card from Renato and handed it over. “You may or may not want to get in touch with this fellow; he knows me as Phantom. Hopefully the impromptu measures I took have kept my real identity out of this. Right now he only has Ren-kun’s number.”

Renato shook the new phone as a reminder.

“Right.” He rattled off the number so that Daisuke could enter it into his phone. “I’m keeping it on vibrate, so if you really need to get ahold of me, a text message might be better.”

Daisuke nodded. “You up for a job, or do you want to wait until your break is over?”

“What have you got?” The folder he was handed revealed a Lightning who was killing people during thunder storms with arcs of Lightning Flame. “This one at least seems to have some brains,” he muttered. A young man, approached for recruitment, even if his targets were a bit dicey. He had refused, badly wounding the recruiter. He flipped through the supporting material and nodded. “I’ll blow his damn head off,” he said and pushed the folder back.

Daisuke tucked the folder away in his briefcase and gave Renato a speculative look.

“Yes, I’m open to jobs.”

Daisuke smiled. Before he left he got Renato’s cell number.

“Kobe sure has a lot of psychos,” he mused. “Maybe it’s something in the water supply.”

Renato shook his head and got back to explaining the functions of the phone.

“It’s a really interesting job,” Renato said enthusiastically.

“You and six others?” he said skeptically. “Isn’t that a bit excessive?”

“I think it’ll be fun. Now, get that shield up and I’ll try shooting the edge. See how it holds up.”

He sighed, a sense of uneasiness creeping up his spine, and blossomed a gravitational disturbance
around him like a sphere. “I hope you do the math.”

Renato favored him with a sarcastic smile, aimed, and fired. The bullet hit the shield and ricocheted off, its path decaying rapidly both from the shape change and the loss of momentum. “Perfect. Ready for another, closer to center?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

Renato fired again, and again, and Hisui was ready for it to fail and for him to have to catch a bullet directly before it could plow through a limb or, worse, his heart, but the shield held and kept deflecting things exactly as Renato had calculated. His lover mentioned trying an RPG, but he was smiling when he said it, so Hisui knew it was a joke.

“It’s interesting how subtle your aura is when you’re using flames,” Renato said once they were back at the apartment. “Even when you’re manifesting that power around you I can barely see anything.”

He arched a brow. “It’s not as though yours is exactly flamboyant, Ren-koī. But for mine, I suppose it’s because gravity is invisible? You can only see it as a byproduct.”

“True. Most of mine works internally, unless I’m specifically targeting someone else.”

“If I have my way about it, you won’t be able to see anything at all. I’d rather people not notice ahead of time that I have a barrier, should it ever come to a fight.”

“How do you think magic would be affected?” Renato asked, eyeing the yakisoba Hisui was preparing.

He exhaled heavily. “I would like to think it would also ricochet or be spun off,” he replied. “Magic may as well be called a type of energy, and everything is subject to gravity. Huh. That’s an interesting thought, isn’t it. I guess I won’t know until it happens, if ever.”

“Eh?”

“I can only ‘anchor’ it around myself,” he said, reaching out to bring plates from the cupboard and set them on the counter. “The most I could try is to bounce spells off a mirror, assuming that’d even work. I’ve never found a reason to try prior to now. When I use gravity against someone else, I’m coming at them from the outside, enclosing them. Maybe it’s a matter of perspective, if I can visualize it properly in my head, to make it work away from me, but as it stands, I am the Earth, and it all moves in relation to me, not in relation to what I’m affecting. Perhaps if I were a mathematician as you are, I would find it to be a lot simpler, but I’m not.”

“I see,” Renato said slowly. “And I can unload equations and diagrams on you until I’m blue in the face and it won’t do a damn thing except annoy you in the end.”

He looked over with a small smile, then starting plating the meal.

Renato was away for a week, but on Saturday they were back at the clearing, trying a different idea. Hisui was materializing a series of squarish obsidian plates and spinning them around himself at high speed. Renato tried firing at the edges of the shaped sphere, and the bullets were spun off in directions dependent on where they first impacted.

“I think I prefer the gravity sphere,” he said. “Less obvious. But this would hide me from view, I suppose, though I’m drawing a blank as to why I’d do that. Unless it was to disillusion myself, release them, and move to a new position.” He bit his lip, then shrugged. “Or I could just move so fast they never saw it happen.”
He was annoyed that Renato said nothing about his recent job, and also mildly suspicious. That nagging sensation of uneasiness had lessened, but it was still there.

“Well, I wouldn’t use it when there are allies around,” Renato said. “Not everyone can calculate like I can, and even I have a limit as to how many variables I can handle at once. But if you were in a bad situation, the visible ‘armor’ would be an interesting tactic and potentially highly lethal, turning attacks back like that.”

He shrugged again and turned toward the mirror they had brought along. “Right. Let’s try something simple.”

Renato took a seat over at the makeshift table and braced himself against the wood with one arm.

Hisui shot off a tickling charm at the mirror and was hit a moment later on the bounce-back, but clenched his jaw for the second the spell lasted. He nodded, set himself, manifested the sphere, then released it with an annoyed sound.

“What’s wrong?”

He gave Renato a look. “I was very nearly an idiot who sent a spell from inside the sphere.” He focused on the mirror again, recast the spell, and immediately manifested the sphere. The tickling spell ricocheted off and splashed harmlessly against a tree. He tried a few more tests with relatively harmless spells, including a leg-locker, before trying something more dangerous. The blasting hex bounced off, as well.

“I’m not about to test Unforgivables out,” he said as he walked over to Renato. “And I’m not even sure I could cast them. Hopefully I will never be in a position to find out if they get redirected. If they do, well—as you said, not the kind of defense that works well around allies.”

“You up for French tonight?”

“Sure.”

A week later he got a text message from Daisuke regarding a Vongola job, so he arranged a meeting at a park some distance away. Antonio actually flew out from Italy to deliver the Sky Flame-sealed packet. ‘Ah, seems that Daisuke imparted some specifications,’ he thought after opening the envelope and sliding out the contents. ‘This is similar to what he gives me to look over. So let’s see. Fugitive from Italy, made the mistake of taking out a Vongola member and then fleeing here.’ He flipped to the next page and noted that a relatively clean hit was preferred, then read through the remainder. ‘I wonder if I can seal stuff with flames the way the Vongola Nono can.’ “Consider it done.”

Antonio nodded. “I’ll keep an eye on the news, but if you would, shoot me a quick text afterward?”

He nodded.

The target had flown into Narita, and had a bolt hole in Tokyo, but could potentially be anywhere in the country. ‘Another test?’ he wondered. As soon as he was out of sight he apparated to the clearing and used a locating spell. ‘East-northeast-ish. Probably still in Tokyo, then.’ A glance at his watch told him he had hours yet before his usual time to retire, so he disillusioned himself and apparated to the magical enclave there, then cast another locater.

Two hours later he had tracked the man down, but he was inside, and if he wanted to place a tracker on the man… He sighed and settled in for a long wait. It was another two hours before he got his chance, when a delivery person arrived with an order. Hisui planted a tracker and left, then apparated
He returned the next evening and was annoyed to find the man still tucked away in his apartment. ‘And he’s paranoid enough to not have any windows uncovered.’ His target emerged at around two o’clock. ‘For a walk?’ he thought in disbelief. He materialized his senbon and waited, then took him out with the usual pattern. After a quick text message consisting entirely of “Done” he apparated home and crashed.

Renato got another job with those six people and that nagging feeling intensified again.

“I don’t like this,” he said unhappily. “This is making me really uneasy. Again.”

Renato’s expression slid into a faint frown. “What are you talking about?” he asked, flicking the ashes off his cigarette.

“You said something, back in Italy. You were the one to notice it and point it out. That morning, before Big Evil attacked, I was restless and uneasy. When you told me about that job you took recently, the same thing happened, and now it’s happening again.”

To his credit, Renato looked as though he was trying to understand; and failing. “But nothing untoward happened.”

“If you say so. Why does it take seven of you? I don’t want any details, because details belong to the person or people giving and doing the job, but what could you possibly be doing that takes so many people, working as a team? Something is wrong with this picture.”

“I—” The alarm on Renato’s phone went off and he quickly pulled it out so he could silence it. “Unfortunately, I have to go. I’ll be back.”

Hisui was treated to a lingering kiss before Renato departed, and was left feeling a decided sense of unhappiness. “My sense of timing sucks. I should have said something earlier.”

Yori meowed his agreement.

“I didn’t think he’d blow me off.”

Yori made a disagreeable sound.

“Fine. I’m exaggerating. He didn’t even say how long he’d be gone for, though. Damn it. I guess since my evening is shot to hell I can work on trying to power runes with flames instead of magic.”

It was a fortnight before Renato showed up again, smiling happily and looking … confident and flushed with success.

‘It’s like it went straight out of his head,’ he thought. ‘But I don’t have anything to go on but a feeling, and it’s not like I’ve ever been all that good with those.’

Renato secured the door and met him halfway, pulling him into a deep, somewhat needy kiss of greeting. Hisui realized he was being sneakily edged toward the bedroom, and decided to go with it. It had been too long.

Mid-October, on a Sunday, Renato showed up with a cold dinner from an Italian restaurant, and a tablecloth, which he flipped over the kitchen table before unpacking his bounty of food.

“What’s the occasion?” he asked, knowing something was up.
“My birthday,” Renato replied, “and I didn’t feel like going out, so I got this to go.”

He blinked and gathered up some cutlery. “Why didn’t you mention this before now?” he asked, then went to get a bottle of wine. Renato had gotten tired of there never being any alcohol handy and had brought over a selection.

Renato finished plating the food and looked up. “I didn’t want you to make a fuss, or buy anything.”

Hisui scowled. “Saying so would have sufficed. You didn’t have to be all sneaky about it.”

Renato leered at him and took a seat. “There’s only one gift I want from you, tesoro. Tonight, anyway.”

A week later a quiet little birth announcement arrived in the morning mail. Oddly enough, one Sawada Tsunayoshi had been born the day after Renato’s birthday. “At least I know—” He paused. “No, I assume that everything is all right. I somehow doubt that Sawada-san would have sent this if something had happened to Nana-chan. I get the feeling he’d skip right over that entry in her address book.”

He set the card at the end of the counter next to the cat statue that persisted and set about making bentos for lunch. He was feeling uneasy again and dreaded, to a degree, their session at the clearing. Renato showed up at ten o’clock and pinned him against the wall for a lingering kiss of greeting, then grabbed the bento stack. Hisui apparated them and decided, for a change of pace, to return to working on his aim.

“Impressive,” Renato said, eyeing the target. “I’m tempted to bring in a sniper rifle for you to try, though we’d have to find an appropriate position. Working with a sight is a bit different.”

“Why do I have this feeling that one of the walls in your apartment secretly opens up to display an entire armory?” he said dryly.

Renato pursed his lips briefly. “How’d you guess?”

He sighed. “Let me think. Because no matter how fond you are of that gun, I can’t see you using only that? Though I would expect you to stick with proper guns and not something like a missile launcher.”

“If I’m not the one doing the aiming I consider it a cheat,” Renato replied.

He moved back to the next line scuffed in the dirt and took aim again. If he could get accuracy down, he could switch to speed, but he knew it would never be his weapon of choice. As he continued to shoot he considered the issue of that last Vongola hit and how to, in the future, get inside an apartment when he could not see a lock to manipulate. Perhaps he could bring in a frame of sorts? Something large enough to place locks and deadbolts into, so he could sit on the opposite side and work at opening them without being able to see them. It was similar to Renato’s idea of planting a materialized object in a target’s home and coming back to it later to use as a weapon. There were not always windows he could see the locks on, and even some windows were treated with a reflective coating which obscured the mechanisms.

Hisui had just gotten up after their lunch to re-start practice when Renato said, “Got another job.” He sounded entirely too happy about it, and Hisui’s feelings of uneasiness did some painful mountain climbing up his spine.

He checked his position and fired; the bullet winged the edge of the target. “That’s right, our conversation about this was cut off before.”
“It’s a bit odd,” Renato said, “but I still don’t see where—”

“Don’t see?” he interrupted, firing again. “What takes seven people? Are you guys taking on entire famiglie or something to require that kind of manpower? Because I haven’t heard anything about an operation of that scale. I’ve got ants in my fucking spinal cord and you’re sitting there smiling at me like it’s a walk in the park. If someone out there is gathering seven incredibly-skilled hitmen, why was I not included? We’ve done team work before and you said yourself I’m on par with you.”

“I never thought I’d see you express jealousy over a job,” Renato remarked.

He lowered the gun and turned to look at his lover, a scowl erupting. “Jealousy? Really?”

“Look, it’s a group of Flames of the Sky users. Earth doesn’t exactly fit into that.”

“So you’re saying members of the Varia? Because they’re supposedly the best out there.” He turned back and took aim. His increasing agitation was making that difficult, but a tiny part of him acknowledged it was good for practice purposes. He fired and winged the edge again.

“Well, no,” Renato admitted. “He said the strongest seven.”

“The client.”

“Yes. There’s an amazing reward waiting if we complete the series. The first two jobs were super cool, Hisui! And I’m meeting some interesting people.”

He let his lover ramble on for a bit, his mood steadily darkening, before saying, “Again, you’re the one who pointed it out in the first place.”

“So you’re prescient? Can you predict what lottery numbers I should play?” Renato joked.

Something snapped in his head, like brittle twigs being stepped on by an uncaring foot. The gun hit the ground as he turned slowly. A stream of viscous fire erupted from his hand, headed straight at Renato, whose eyes bugged out; a split second later he dove to the side, rolling and coming up in a half-kneeling position. A tree behind his lover’s original position burst into flames. Hisui’s focus shifted to follow the movement and fire erupted again; another tree went up. “Don’t mock my feelings, Sinclair,” he snarled.

“Shit. You—” Renato dashed off to a new position. “You manifested fire?”

“What’s your fucking point, Sinclair?” he demanded in a growl, turning to correct his aim and sending out another stream of fire. “I’m trying to kill you and you’re worried about the method!?”

“No!” Renato did another dodge roll and popped up again near a non-burning tree. “Hisui! You’re—you’re angry enough at me to manifest fire? Shit. I—I need to rethink these jobs.”

The fire coating his hand went out as that registered in his brain. Right about then he realized that several trees were burning merrily and the flames were spreading. “Kami-sama,” he muttered, and flung out his hands to spray water around. Once the fires were out he glanced around and spotted Renato. He was flat on his back and staring up at the sky, a frown drawing his brows down. He sat down beside him and waited.

Had it been a magical thing, or part of his secondary flames? Renato had theorized that fury might trigger it. He paged back through his memory regarding spells and came up with fiendfyre. But there had been no creature shapes and he had put it out easily. It hadn’t been a firestorm. Incendio? He got back up and moved away from his lover, and took aim at one of the wet trees, then cast.
‘No, that’s not it,’ he thought, then sprayed the tree with more water. ‘Doesn’t look at all alike. They were more like thinned down lava? And I don’t recall feeling any actual magic.’ His brow furrowed unhappily as he mentally dropped back to Renato’s facetious comment. Flames poured out of his hand again and tried to ignite the tree. ‘They really are kind of like lava,’ he observed, eyeing them avidly. The sustained outpouring evaporated the water and set the tree aflame again.

They cut off abruptly when he felt himself being enfolded in a hug from behind.

“I’m sorry,” Renato whispered in his ear. “You’re right. I’m the one who noticed it first, and in my excitement I blew it off. I didn’t listen to what you were trying to tell me. There’s something odd about all of this. You are one of the best. If that was all the client was really after you’d have been included. There shouldn’t be any reason to limit it to only certain flames. You’ve felt uneasy ever since the first one. Even if it’s not obvious yet what’s going on, I should not be ignoring that.”

He slowly relaxed as Renato spoke, sending out a spray of water before his arm lowered.

“That you can get so angry about it—well. That means I really fucked up.”

“I don’t know what it means,” he said quietly. “I just know how it makes me feel.”

“And it’s telling you to tell me to run screaming in the opposite direction.”

“Basically. Nothing straight-up fatal. If that were the case I expect something different would have gone down in Genoa.”

Renato shuffled him around in his arms so they could face each other. “But people still got hurt. Did you ever get like this before? Keeping your friend safe, for example?”

His gaze drifted off to the side. “…Looking back, it all seems so coincidental. I was generally in a position to be able to drive away anyone looking to prey on her.”

“Anyone else?”

He made a face. “Small children? Grannies?” He shrugged.

Renato’s lips pursed. He glanced around, then led Hisui over to the still intact seating and sat down, pulling Hisui down to straddle his knees so they could still face each other. “Generalized, but more accurate and intense if you actually give a damn about the person.”

“Ano… I guess … yes.”

Renato kissed him, the corner of his mouth, then said, “All right. I’ll turn it down. I’ll stop. Just please, don’t try to incinerate me again if I don’t listen?”

He exhaled slowly. “Should I stab you instead? I can have a senbon with your name on it ready at a moment’s notice, Ren-koi.”

Renato smiled briefly. “Stabbing is much better. How about we head back for now?”

“So no problems turning down that job?” he asked a week later.

He was given a confused look in response. “What job? What are you talking about?”

He blinked slowly. “Do you remember a week ago? In the clearing?”

“Yes, you made a breakthrough in manifes—huh. Something is wrong. I’m missing something.
What am I missing?”

He blinked again at the intense look on Renato’s face. Someone had fucked with his lover’s memories? “You took on two jobs for some unnamed client, with six other people, all of the Flames of the Sky. It made me really uneasy. When you mentioned the third job—”

“Oh!” Renato gnawed on his index finger knuckle. “I can’t remember any of the details. Someone messed with my head. But you’re okay?”

He nodded and repeated back verbatim every conversation they had had regarding those jobs.

“I … wish I could remember. Who it was.”

“If they were willing and able to screw with your memories, we should be pleased they didn’t just kill you for backing out. They might think they can ensnare you again later on. Maybe you should just let it lie and not take any jobs that come from an unknown source in the future?” he suggested.

Renato nodded, still looking disturbed.

Nana sent him an invitation for the winter break, and all but begged him to bring along his friend. It was a bit early to show off her newborn, but she was obviously trying to accommodate his schedule. Renato was trying to read it and not being very subtle about it, so he sighed and handed it over.

“Oo,” Renato uttered, “meeting the family. You want to say yes, but you’re worried that Sawada will be present.”

“Of course.”

“It’s up to you, tesoro, but I’m kinda thinking that Sawada is not going to rip away his wife’s innocent view of you. He’s also Vongola, so at some point…”

“If you want to go, you’ll need to bring the usual gift.”

“Diapers?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, ¥30,000, in an appropriate card. To be fair, I don’t have a clue how it works in other countries.”

“Money, huh? I suppose that way the parents can purchase whatever they need, rather than getting six bassinets and a half dozen prams. Same thing for weddings?”

He nodded. “It’s different depending on who it’s coming from, but yes, though some people go for a more Western approach.”

“I would love to meet this friend of yours,” Renato declared. “Count me in.”
They arrived by apparition and went to the hotel to check in and get settled. “So, this is where you come from,” Renato commented, gazing out the window of their suite. “Charming little place. You thinking of buying property here?”

“Yes.”

Renato focused on him, head tilted slightly. “‘Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove—if these delights thy mind may move, then live with me and be my love.’”

His brow went up. “Sure.”

“Magnifico!” Renato swooped in to give him a passionate kiss. “I’ll check into it.”

The door at the Sawada home was opened by Nana’s mother. “Fukushima-san,” he greeted with a bow, “I am pleased to see you.” He made introductions and she, after accepting their cards, ushered them off into the living room.

Sawada’s eyes went fractionally wide on seeing Renato. A moment later he was right in front of them, smiling broadly. “Wonderful to see you again,” he claimed heartily, then shifted the smile over to Renato, who smiled back and introduced himself. “Either of you like a drink?”

He sighed faintly. “A soft drink, please.”

“Whatever you have handy,” Renato said with a shrug.

Sawada disappeared and was back quickly, offering up cans, and then cracked his beer open. “So, this is the mysterious friend.”

‘The subtlety is just killing me,’ he thought. “Yes. We’ve known each other for about a year now.”

“And what an interesting year it’s been,” Renato said, cracking his soda open and taking a sip. “I’d ask if we could smoke, but I’m not sure you’d want that with a newborn in the house.”

“Outside is fine,” Sawada replied, then gestured toward the sliding glass doors at the back of the room.

Renato lit up after they had exited the house and offered the cigarette to Hisui, who accepted and took a drag, then Renato lit one for himself. “You?” he asked, tapping the pack.

Sawada shook his head. “Thank you, no.”

“Come in when you’re done with those,” Nana called from the door. “I have someone I want you to meet!”

Hisui smiled at her and nodded.

“Well, I lost a bet,” Renato said with a regretful shake of his head. “You reacted visibly.”

Sawada looked at each of them, a vague shade of suspicion in his eyes, then smiled broadly. “I’ll have to work on that.”
Hisui smoked and took sips of his soda, wondering how long they could keep up the fencing. The pauses between responses were a little too long to be anything but awkward.

“Construction, eh?”

“It’s a variable profession, but lucrative, and I’m fairly high up,” Sawada replied. “You?”

“Oh, I’ve mostly been sticking to Japan of late. Plenty to be done. Done a few ‘lectures’ elsewhere, though, as the opportunity arises.”

“What brought you to Japan in the first place?”

Renato smiled charmingly. “I came on holiday, but heard some super cool ghost stories and stuck around to check them out.”

Hisui stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray on the table and sighed, then looked straight at Sawada. “Yeah, he found Phantom,” he said with a lilt of his brow, then retreated inside after a subtle gesture to strip away the scent. Nana beamed at him and hurried him over to a little carrier that held a sleepy infant. He set his drink on the table and examined the child. “He takes after you.”

“He does, doesn’t he,” she said happily. “But you never know, he might end up with hair like his daddy’s.”

Nana’s mother disagreed. “I think he’ll be just like you in looks. We can only hope he makes a friend like Hisui-kun.”

His brow went up at that. He hoped that was a compliment and not a prediction about the amount of bullying she expected the child to deal with growing up.

Nana gave him a look. “And you brought your friend with you,” she said, her hands coming up to clasp under her chin. “I’m so happy. I can finally meet him.”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it. He already has an ego the size of China. You don’t need to make it worse.”

“What was that, tesoro?” Renato said from behind him.

“Oh my,” Nana said in bemusement. “You never said your friend was foreign.”

“Nana-chan, my mysterious friend, Sinclair Renato. Ren-kun, Sawada Nana, my best friend.”

Renato smiled charmingly and inclined his head in lieu of a bow, then peered into the carrier. “And who is this adorable little fellow?”

Nana beamed. “Tsunayoshi!”

The baby chose that moment to wake up and start squalling something fierce. “Oh my,” Nana said. “Let me get him taken care of.” She carefully extracted him and hustled off, her mother in tow.

Hisui reclaimed his drink and nodded at the doors again. They ended up back at the outside table and he lit up again. It helped what with having to be around Sawada and having essentially admitted to his alter ego.

Sawada gave him a penetrating look. “How long?”

“Since I was fourteen, but I was keeping my best friend safe for long before that. She has no idea,”
he said, tilting his head at the house.

Sawada nodded. “You two have been doing jobs for Vongola lately. Huh. No one knew who Phantom really was.”

“Now you do,” he replied. “He’s been under your nose this whole time, ever since you decided to have dinner in a certain restaurant. The only reason I said anything is because I have some idea who you are in the Vongola, and I don’t see you selling that information to the highest bidder.”

Sawada shook his head, then said, “Well. That helps, actually. Nono was getting real curious about you. Sinclair-san here is a lot easier to keep an eye on.”

“Curious?”

“Yes. I’m sure you two have heard about the disturbance a bit back. Since then he’s been keeping an eye out for the odd freelancer. Everyone said you were one of the best, but Biforcuto is incredibly close-mouthed on the whole issue.”

“As they should be,” he said.

“Oh, I agree. You won’t hear me dispute something like that. Just, expect more work to come your way, if you’re in a position to take it. I know you still have university to contend with. But it would mean getting things done over here without having to send people every time. Cuts down on the overall expense.”

‘How pragmatic.’ He nodded.

Sawada looked back at Renato and grinned; it was the first natural smile Hisui had seen on the man. “You’re pretty damn good if you could track down a ghost.”

Renato shrugged deprecatingly. “I do what I can.”


“Tesoro! You wound me,” Renato said with mock despair.

“Not lately. But like I said, I have a senbon with your name on it if necessary,” he replied, smiling innocently. After taking in the expression on Sawada’s face he said, “My best kept secret, that I have an actual personality.”

Sawada stared at him, then grinned.

After they left they stopped by a real estate agent to browse listings. He wondered if he should just invite Renato to share his apartment if they were going to buy a house together. ‘I’ll let him bring it up. He’s bound to push again.’ There were a few larger houses on the outskirts of town and his lover got information on those, then talked to the agent about setting up appointments for viewing, and handed over his phone number for when they came through.

Hisui showed Renato around town and even walked past the houses they had information for. All of them looked fairly standard from the outside, though there were differences in the interior layouts according to the papers his lover had stashed away. One had a bit more actual land involved and he leaned toward that one, but as he said, “Any of them would work. It’s all a variation on theme.”

Renato nodded. “If you’re not available I can poke around on my own, verify their condition.”
“Even if there are some issues, they can be fixed,” he said with a sidelong look. “As for protection, well, owning a place would allow me greater freedoms, and not have to rely on something that requires me to be present so often to power it. Speaking of which, Big Evil is back at it.”

“How is he doing that?”

He shrugged. “Something I’ve never come across, obviously. But I sincerely doubt you can find it at the local book shop, whatever he’s done. I keep expecting to hear that the district in Genoa has been razed to the ground in retaliation for the humiliation of being defeated.”

“Wouldn’t they have their own version of an underground?” Renato asked.

“In theory.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Whatever the guy did, it made him look less than human. His face reminded me of a wax statue left in a hot room for too long. Knowing how to counter it would be only as useful as it is prevalent. I imagine the reports from Genoa have made it to Britain, to that group over there.”

“True, though it remains to be seen if they can do anything with the information.” Renato kicked a stray stone off to the side. “Not really our problem, I suppose.” His phone rang, so he flipped it open and said, “Yeah… Yes… We’ll meet you there… Right.” He flipped it shut and tucked it away.

“Time to backtrack. The house with the most land is available to tour.”

He nodded and turned around. The exterior of the house was in fine shape. There were a few spots that would need a little help, but by and large it seemed sound, and the land itself was usable. Inside was a fairly standard layout for a home, but it had larger rooms and more of them, which meant that Renato would have room for an armory, and they would have room for guests, should it be necessary. He leaned in to whisper in his lover’s ear, “Keep the agent distracted. I want to check a few things with magic.”

Renato nodded and went off to be excessively charming, so Hisui roamed around flicking spells everywhere looking for structural damage, vermin, and other nastiness. There were a few minor issues, but nothing he would have trouble dealing with. He returned to Renato and nodded. “It’s fine,” he said quietly.

“We love it!” Renato told the agent. “Let’s go talk money.”

It took a couple of weeks for everything to be settled and the transaction to be complete, but when it was, and it was theirs, Hisui apparated them there again and started figuring out what he would need in the way of warding materials. No sense paying some company to protect the place electronically when he could embed ward stones that drew off natural energy after they had been initially powered up. He also started tossing out spells to correct the issues he had found previously.

“So these wards… You mentioned vermin.”

He paused. “Yes. You’re worried about your insects. I’m not planning to block them out, but I expect that if we get an infestation of something horrible, you’ll take care of it, or prevent it from happening in the first place. However, if we’re not going to be here for any length of time, then I will for that time. Sound fair?”

Renato nodded. “Sounds fair.” Then he smiled slyly. “Does this mean I can share the apartment with you, too?”

“I was wondering when that would come up.”

“Aw, you’ve been thinking about it,” Renato said and edged closer, a gleam in his eyes.
He sighed. “Yes, Ren-koi.”

“Yes, you’ve been thinking about it, or yes, I can move in?” Renato asked, getting close enough to lean in and run his tongue up the side of Hisui’s neck.

“Yes.”

Renato pulled back. “Wait, is that an inclusive or exclusive operation?”

His mouth twitched. “You’re the mathematician.”

Renato thumbed his lower lip and frowned. “Ah. We’re a couple, so it’s inclusive, so that was a yes to both. Perfect!”

He chuckled and reached out to yank his lover into a kiss, then pushed him away. “Let me work.”

He was sketching on a duplicate of the floor plans when his phone vibrated, causing his hand to twitch. ‘Good thing I’m only using a pencil,’ he thought as he got his phone out and checked it.

“Antonio has a job for me,” he informed his lover as he sent back an acceptance. “Time to return, I guess.” He grabbed the plans and tucked them away, then offered his arm. Moments later they were back in the Kyoto apartment. “I have an hour before I have to meet him. How much do you want to put in the house? I mean—” He frowned.

“I don’t see any reason why we can’t start outfitting the place in full, but unless you’re dreaming of entirely new things for the kitchen, there’s no point in—well, unless we chose to use the place during your breaks, in which case I suppose we would.”

He nodded. “Might as well do the whole thing, then. It’s not like we don’t have the funds. But I want to get the wards in place first, so that some thug doesn’t cruise on in and start hauling things away.”

Renato hummed thoughtfully. “All right. It’s still early, so I’m going to go poke around some shops. You want me to bring back dinner?”

“Please. Or we can just order once we’re both back and have it delivered. Whichever.”

A short time later he was back in that park, reading a book up in the branches of the tree. When Antonio arrived he dropped down to the ground and took a seat at the table there. Antonio smiled and joined him.

“I’m a little surprised to see you again, but at the same time not,” Hisui remarked.

“I’ve been reassigned over here. It was decided that giving another person knowledge of who you are was unwise. I have a secure connection to the boss, so if a job needs doing over here, I get the call, and then I can bring the details to you or your friend, depending.”

He nodded. That was … thoughtful … of the Vongola Nono. It may have had something to do with Sawada, too. “What’s the job?”

Antonio opened his case and retrieved a folder, then slid it over. “Rogue agent.”

‘This is new,’ he thought, and started reading. The target was a lower-level Vongola, not bloodline, who had been caught trying to work his way up the ladder by the brilliant shortcut of assassinating his fellows. ‘Because that usually goes over so well with the higher ups.’ The target had fled once he got wind that his activities had been discovered. On previous visits to Japan he was known to spend
time in Sendai, but the Vongola had no solid proof of where he presently was in the country, only that he had been spotted coming in through Narita.

‘Well, finding him won’t be a problem, but…’ He propped his head against his left fist. ‘I think I should ask Renato a few questions before I start. This just wants his death, but for proof? I should probably leave enough of him to be identified. Perhaps Renato would have some advice for that, too.’ He nodded. ‘Yeah. I’ll take care of it,’ he said, closing the folder and pushing it back. ‘It’ll take some time to track him down, but he’s as good as dead.’

Antonio nodded and tucked the folder away. “Send me a text,” he requested, then departed.

Hisui took off to a private spot and apparated home. Renato was not yet back so he cast a locator with the target’s face and information in mind. ‘West-ish? Huh. He’s not even close to where they thought he might be.’ He sent off a quick text to Renato to let him know he was home, then sat back to contemplate. He could easily enough kill the target with senbon and leave behind the face and fingerprints, or he could make him bleed out by nipping off his legs, or he could even shoot the guy. It depended a lot on how the guy was living.

Renato showed up some time later with Chinese, so Hisui asked his questions in between mouthfuls, the foremost being, “How long would it normally take you to track someone down using your usual methods, if you didn’t know where in Japan they were?”

Renato mulled that over. “As much as a month, but closer to two weeks. It depends in part on the season and what I have available for insects or creatures. If I know what names they use as aliases I can slip into branch offices and poke around in the computer records, try to see where any cards are being used. If you want me to teach you how to do that kind of thing I’d be happy to. But for doing it the magical way, I’d say run him down, plant a tracker on him, and use that time to figure out a strategy.”

He nodded. “I may take you up on that. It wouldn’t be a bad thing at all to know. Any suggestions as to where to leave the corpse so that it’d be reported correctly?”

Renato eyed him curiously. “You don’t usually worry about that. Huh. You could always hang the target off a lamppost where the police are sure to find him. Or, if you want the client or intermediary to, maybe a sheltered spot on a rooftop you could pass along the location of.”

‘So, a fortnight. I can spend time in the evenings keeping an eye on the fellow, seeing where his bolt hole is, making a plan. If nothing else it’s an interesting challenge. I’m getting more complicated hits, which is a double-edged sword, but still…’

He found the target the next day after classes and planted a tracker, then started stalking him. He had sent a text to Renato that he would be working, so he had plenty of time to watch and think. His target eventually ended up at an apartment building and his tracker placed him on the tenth floor. He could trick his way in through the front—not an option he cared for—or come at him from the outside, though that depended on what sort of windows were available. Or, he could do it while the fellow was wandering, though during that day all he had done was have dinner and window shop.

That reminded him that it would not be a bad idea to visit Tokyo’s magical district and poke around for some kind of seedy underworld. It might be pointless, but it also might be useful at some time in the future. He flew up to pinpoint the target’s windows and noted that the reflective coating could almost be seen through close up. It was an option, given that. Or, he could go with something Renato had suggested ages ago. His cat statue was still sitting there on the counter.

The next night he was back with his binoculars handy, trying to get glimpses of the interior of the
apartment. Unfortunately, from what little he could see, it was mostly off-white and cream, so trying to tuck some senbon into place would be difficult. Renato’s idea would have to wait for some other, more opportune target. He returned daily to refresh the tracker, and used the information from it to overlay a pattern of movement on a mental map.

In the meantime Renato was teaching him what he knew about information mining and sneaking into places they should not have access to. Daisuke also had another job for him, but that was taken care of in just a couple of days. Eventually he felt enough time had passed and went after the Vongola target. As the man was re-entering his bolt hole Hisui sent six senbon at the back of his neck, to shatter the vertebrae there and transect the spinal cord. The target jerked forward and fell into the entryway, and Hisui reached out to snag the man’s keys.

When he was certain the man was dead he again reached out, to close the door and use the keys to lock it. The keys were then brought over to be dropped temporarily into an obsidian box. Back at his own home he sent Antonio a text, inviting him to a meeting at the park. They met up the next afternoon, at that same tree.

“Having problems?” Antonio asked.

He shook his head. “I debated on how best to deliver,” he said, pushing over the box. “The target is dead. These are the keys to the apartment he was using. You’ll find him just inside the door.”

Antonio blinked and took the keys, staring at them for a moment. “Where?”

“Hamada,” he replied, then waited for Antonio to get out a notebook to rattle off the exact address.

“All right,” Antonio said with a pleased nod. “I’ll check it out and shoot you a quick text to let you know the transfer’s gone through.”

Life continued on with classes, weekends spent at the house, Renato’s impromptu lessons, and the occasional job being handled. Then Renato got a message in July from Antonio and went off to meet him. About a half hour later a text came in on his phone, Renato requesting that he join them. He furrowed his brow in confusion and set off to meet them.

He took in the oddly amused look Renato had on his face as he took a seat, and arched a brow at the handler.

“I don’t know,” Antonio said. “I showed him the job and he paused, then started laughing and said he wanted a consult.” He pushed the folder over.

He snorted when he scanned the first page. The target was Fenrir Greyback, werewolf and notorious child killer. They got news of him even in Japan. “Where in hell did this come from?” he muttered.

Antonio’s eyes cut off to the side.

“Not who,” he clarified. “What originating country?”

“The client is in Italy, but has strong ties to Britain.”

He propped his head against his fist as he flipped through the remainder of the material, then he exchanged a look with Renato. “There are potentially serious complications involved in this job,” he finally said to Antonio. “This guy—he’s special.”

Renato snorted in amusement.
“Special?”

He looked at Renato again, who shrugged. ‘Shit. I’m not a part of the magical community, not really, but I try to respect their statute.’ “Special as in special powers. He also—he has a highly infectious disease. There’s something like Omertà. Not exactly the same, but similar enough. They must be desperate to have called on the Vongola.”

Antonio’s expression was a study in confusion. He snapped out of it a few seconds later and said, “Okay, let me talk to the boss. I’ll get back to you two.” He grabbed the folder and tucked it away, then strode off.

As soon as they were in the clear Hisui apparated them back to the apartment. “The hell? What is the magical world doing soliciting help from the mafia?”

Renato chuckled. “No way in hell was I going to accept that as it was.”

“That guy gives mad dog Englishmen a whole new meaning.”

“You know, I’ve known you for quite a while now, and I still don’t know your birthday,” Renato commented, giving him a quizzical look.

“Ano…” He shrugged. “I have two of them. My real one and the one the orphanage decided on based on what the doctors said about my age. I’m surprised you haven’t just poked around in my records at the university.”

Renato shook his head. “You being there gave me an idea of your age, but the exact day wasn’t something I cared about at the time.”

“August, the twenty-first,” he said, “but the real one is earlier.”

“Which one do you care about?”

He snorted. “Neither, really, but August, I suppose, since that’s considered official. It’s not as though I bother with any of it.”

Renato nodded slowly, thoughtfully, then changed the subject.

Two weeks later they both got a text from Antonio, asking for a meeting. He apparated them back to the apartment, then they walked to the park and took a seat. They talked quietly until Hisui’s gravitational net signaled a live one incoming, at which point he looked up in that direction. Antonio appeared moments later and took a seat.

“Well. I spoke with the boss,” Antonio said. “They did some digging on the client. I don’t know all the finer details for the outcome, but—I’ve been asked to request that you two come to the Vongola base to speak directly with the Vongola Nono.”

His brow shot up.

“If you agree, he will send his private jet to transport you.”

He looked at Renato, read the minute twitches in his facial features, then focused on Antonio again. “Just to point out, I am unable to travel out of the country until the third of August at the earliest. If that is acceptable…”

“All right. I’ll let him know. I’ll be in touch.”
The mansion was huge. Antonio played escort the entire trip from Japan, but he was joined by three others once they entered. There were rooms to either side and the entrance hall was straightforward in design, but past that point the corridors were more like a maze. Hisui built up a mental map along the way, but, depending on what Antonio might have imparted to the Nono, suspected they knew he would not be disoriented by that application of defense.

After twenty minutes of walking they arrived at a set of double doors. One of the escorts knocked, and the door was opened seconds later. Sawada stepped into view, grinned, and gestured them inside. The room itself was large and strangely bare.

‘He looks about sixty, perhaps? Maybe a bit younger,’ he thought, eyeing the Vongola Nono, who was seated on a slightly elevated throne-like chair with three men of varying ages arrayed behind him. Sawada led them to a set of chairs in a semi-circle before the Nono and gestured again. Hisui bowed before taking one.

Once everyone was seated the Vongola Nono said, “Thank you for coming. After Antonio alerted me to the peculiar circumstances surrounding the job we did some digging, and it has come to my attention that there is another world out there.” He paused significantly. “I must assume, then, that the two of you are aware of this world of magic.”

Renato lifted his chin and, after he received a nod, said, “Were you made aware of the term squib, sir?”

“No. I am fully magical, though I never attended one of their schools. The magical world teaches indolence and sloth, so I prefer not to rely too heavily on what abilities I figured out how to use. I regularly buy papers so I can keep an eye on their doings, in the event that they might spill over into the … mundane world.”

Nono nodded thoughtfully. “Intriguing. Please explain to me your knowledge of the target and the circumstances surrounding him.”

Hisui looked over at Renato long enough to get an opinion from his expression, then said, “Greyback is a werewolf. One of the worst examples of one I have ever heard of. If the reports are to be believed he delights in terrorizing and eating children, though he seems to have no qualms about going against those older. Those he doesn’t eat he turns, to add to his pack. He prefers children for that, because he has that much more time to indoctrinate them before they become strong enough to potentially challenge him.

“He is allied with that dark lord over there in Britain, though I doubt he is officially a Death Eater. From what I understand Big Evil is prejudiced against other races and half-breeds, but he obviously
takes advantage of what Greyback is capable of. He is magical, which means it’s entirely possible that finding him may present a problem, depending on what protections he employs. Being a werewolf means he has exceptional senses, so getting into a position to make the hit… Long range is best, obviously. Weres also heal with amazing speed and can take a lot of damage. I was … shocked … to hear that a hit was taken out on him. Either the magicals are too scared of him to do it themselves, or something else is at work.”

When it became apparent that he had wound down, Nono nodded again. “Do you have any personal experience either with the target or with these … Death Eaters?”

“Ren-kun and I had the misfortune to run into some in Genoa last summer, at the magical shopping area there. I found the incursion to be impolite, so I went outside and killed many of them, though two got away. Ren-kun took out many himself, from the window. The leader, Big Evil, disintegrated, but we have since learned that he is back, somehow. It is one of the reasons why neither of us is particularly interested in going anywhere near Britain, or even France. I have not heard that his people have returned to Italy, though, nor seen anything to make me believe that they have been preying on the mundane population.”

“You do not use his name?”

He shook his head. “It is said that there is a Taboo placed on his…” He paused, eyeing the ceiling for a moment. “His name must be fake, and I sincerely doubt he is a lord. Hishō no Shi is … pathetic, but explanatory. The Taboo is a magical effect, like a far-reaching spider’s web; it alerts someone to the use of that name. He has people called Snatchers who arrive in response, to capture or kill. I do not know the geographical limits, so I prefer to simply call him Big Evil.”

He was unhappy, to say the least, that one of his secrets was out, because if nothing else, it highlighted that he probably could have been taking out certain targets much faster than he had. Then again, he had said he preferred not to rely too much on magic, so…

Nono looked down and steepled his hands in front of himself, bracing his elbows on the arms of his chair. After several minutes he said, “Do you know if these Death Eaters are marked in any way?”

“Yes. It is the same as the mark they leave in the sky, a snake coming out of the mouth of a skull.”

Another few minutes passed before Nono asked, “Do these people require some kind of tool to work their magic?”

“Almost all of them, yes. They are taught to rely on them from the start. Very few ever achieve any proficiency without a wand, most believing it is impossible. Though, it is also possible that it requires someone very strong to manage it. I don’t spend normally more than an hour or so in any of the shopping areas, once a month at most, so the odds of me witnessing it at any real scale are negligible.”

“So you are powerful.”

He blinked. “I never really thought about it before. My magic manifested at around the same time as my flames, so I treated them the same.”

Another few minutes of silence passed. Then, “I find myself to be annoyed. I intend to bring in the petitioner. Will you two make yourselves available for that talk?”

The two exchanged a look. “Yes,” Renato said, “we will.”

Nono finally looked up, and at Sawada. “Please escort our friends to one of the guest houses.
Antonio, your usual room will be fine for the time being."

He rose when Sawada did, bowed, then followed the man out. It was not until they were actually at
the guest house that Sawada grinned at him and said, “You’re just full of surprises.”

He sighed. “It was not something I had ever intended to share, because I’m unfond of magicals and
don’t like to be associated with them, but it seemed what knowledge I have of these people was
necessary. Something is … weird … about all this. Not being forthcoming would be damaging, I
expect.”

“Well, I won’t pry. This little place will be fully stocked within the hour, so you’ll be set for your
stay. As soon as everything is ready someone will be along to get you. Probably me or Antonio. I am
curious about something, though.”

His brow went up.

“I’ve never seen you use your flames and…”

He took in the almost boyish excitement on Sawada’s face and sighed, wondered just how quickly
the display would be reported back to Nono, then manifested six senbon and sent them flying around
his body, then up to arc back down and stab into the ground. A second later they vanished.

“He once threatened to give me eye surgery with one of those,” Renato commented, a smirk on his
face.

Sawada stared at the ground, then looked up. “Obsidian?”

Hisui nodded.

“Isn’t that incredibly fragile? It’s just glass.”

“Naturally formed, yes. But not mine. They were the first thing I ever managed.” He stepped away a
bit to scuff a circle in the dirt, then returned to them and manifested a single senbon, then flicked it. It
hit dead center, then dissolved. “These were what I used to drive away the idiots who tried to prey
on people like Nana-chan. I got plenty of practice. Stupid people don’t usually stop being stupid,
after all.”

“Huh. Well, let me give you a quick tour of the place,” Sawada said, then walked over and opened
the door.

Several days later Sawada came for them, to lead them back to the same room inside the mansion.
Instead of being shown to seats he and Renato were positioned off to the side of Nono’s chair.
Seated in one of the lower chairs was a dark-skinned man with exotic good looks, European in
nature.

Nono came in from a door at the back, accompanied by his Guardians, and took his seat; his
Guardians split again, to more or less encircle the seating. “Zabini,” Nono said. “You have been less
than forthcoming in your request, at the risk of the deaths of highly skilled operatives. I will have the
truth of the matter from your lips.”

With every word Zabini was becoming less poised and more antsy.

“You did not mention the important detail of your magic at the outset, nor your weapon, the finer
details on the target, the risk involved, or the truth behind the request.”
Zabini’s hand twitched, and a split second later Hisui was standing practically on Nono’s lap, having manifested a gravity sphere. Spells from Zabini’s wand ricocheted off to impact harmlessly on the walls and ceiling, and Hisui reached out to yank the wand from the man’s hand, letting it skitter away to fetch up against a wall. A thought saw Zabini jerked upward to hover a couple of meters off the floor.

After a thick silence Nono started speaking, so Hisui turned his head slightly and tilted it to show he was listening, though he never took his eyes off Zabini.

“If you will, please lower him into a chair. My Guardians will see to securing him.”

He nodded and slowly lowered the man down. Nono’s Mist Guardian—he assumed that was who it was, anyway—manifested chains around Zabini, tying him to the chair. He stepped away from Nono and back to his place next to Renato, then reached out to bring the wand to a hover in front of one of the Guardians. As soon as the man took it he released his hold and returned to eyeing Zabini.

Zabini was “encouraged” to speak the whole truth at that point. He was a Death Eater out of necessity. Join or die, essentially. Voldemort had tasked him with the death of Greyback, as the were’s activities were getting out of hand and tainted too many magics. Zabini agreed, for he had no other real choice, but was in no way willing to do the job personally. Therefore, he had tapped family contacts and arranged for a petition to go to the Vongola to handle it, despite the financial burden to him. He did not care if any of their men died, so long as the job was done. His mentality was “every man for himself”.

He was also persuaded to speak at length on the subject of the Dark Lord, though most of that information was filed away as being a curiosity and not immediately relevant. Voldemort was having serious trouble gaining further followers, even from other countries; other ministries had geared up to respond at a moment’s notice to incursions. And, as Zabini said, “The Order seems to have figured out the Dark Lord’s secret,” which meant he might likely be a problem no longer, soon enough.

Once they had asked every possible question they could think of and had wrung Zabini dry, the man was killed, for having dared to attack Nono.

Hisui furrowed his brow and looked at Sawada, who tilted his head inquiringly. “I do not know if there is any way Big Evil can track his people,” he said quietly, “due to the mark, alive or dead. Perhaps incineration?”

Sawada nodded and went to go speak with Nono. Shortly thereafter Zabini’s body was ashes that were tidily swept into a container to be disposed of.

Nono spent some time deep in thought, then said, “You have my thanks, Nagao. I would pleased if you and Sinclair would join us for dinner this evening.”

He bowed and saw Renato incline his head.

Nono glanced at Sawada, who immediately moved to escort the two out. At the guest house Sawada said, “You have my thanks, as well. I’ll be back in a few hours. Plenty of time for you two to relax a bit.”

Inside Renato pressed him against the wall for a lingering kiss, then said, “Well. I felt a bit useless there. You reacted so quickly.”

He flipped positions so that his lover was against the wall and initiated another kiss. “A childhood of reacting fast. And you are never useless. You know so much more than I do about so many things.
What I did was a risk, but you’ve been helping me with it, so at least I was able to ensure none of those spells hit anyone.”

“Mm, true,” Renato said. “That was a damn fool thing for Zabini to do, though. In a room inside a maze of corridors, with ten mafiosi? And he chooses to attack the boss? I wonder why he didn’t just teleport out?”

He shrugged. “Either he was too panicky, didn’t have a place close enough that he could visualize well enough, or he was hoping to use something like the imperius to get his way—to what end, I’m not sure. That we were invited to dinner is interesting.”

Renato grinned. “Maybe I’m wrong, but I’m thinking we’re gold at this point. It absolutely can’t hurt that you protected Nono from an attack, before anyone else even registered what the hell was about to happen. There are times when I’m a little envious of you being an Earth.”

He kissed his lover again. “If you were, we would not have the advantage of your amazing ability to enhance stamina, Ren-koii.”

“…Let’s go test that out.”

“Let’s.”

Dinner was in a room of ornate and sumptuous décor, with a long table of gleaming mahogany and matching chairs with amber silk-covered cushioned seats. Hisui almost felt he should be garbed in a kimono instead of the suit he was wearing. In contrast to the environment, dinner itself was relaxed and informal. Conversation was light and exploratory, with Hisui seated to Nono’s right, with Renato next to him. It was not until they were indulging in afters that Nono brought up the topic of Greyback.

“We are under no obligation to proceed with that contract. However, given that the target does not limit himself to magical persons, it might not be such a bad idea to remove him from play. I am willing to fund this myself, proportionate to the risk.”

Renato made a seemingly random pattern on the table surface, but that Hisui interpreted as an agreement. “We accept,” he said, having recognized the motion as something his lover had taken to doing while thinking and was going to be agreeable.

Nono nodded. “Antonio will be your coordinator, as always.”

Talk turned back to lighter matters for the remainder of the meal, and Sawada escorted them back to the guest house after. “Antonio will be here in the morning to bring you to town,” he said before he departed.

They repaired to the sitting room and lounged on the sofa. “Well, what are your thoughts on execution?” Renato asked.

He took his lover’s hand so he could play with his fingers as he thought. “Weres have exceptional healing abilities. Can you negate that?”

Renato looked over at him strangely. “I have no idea, but that’s a very interesting thought.”

“All right. I don’t want to be anywhere he could reach us, so that means either you fill him full of explosive rounds from a distance faster than he can heal, or we go with an old favorite, and I explode his sorry hide.”
“What if he’s with his pack?”

“Good question. They aren’t part of the contract, but… Odds are, anyone he’s indoctrinated is going to potentially be as much of a threat, and they’d have the idea that increasing their numbers is good.”

“Maybe in a situation like that you can handle Greyback while I start plugging the underlings. We can clean up together.”

He nodded and progressed to giving Renato a hand massage, smiling briefly when his lover sighed in pleasure. “But if he’s alone, I’d prefer you try first. I am curious as to how well a were could stand up against your ammunition and skills. It would potentially be valuable information.”

“I agree. And it’s not like I don’t have the weaponry to give it a decent shot.”

“No pun intended.”

Renato snickered. “Not intended, but apropos. I’m not sure if I can negate healing. Sun Flames are about activation, about stimulation and augmentation. I don’t know if I can stimulate in the opposite direction.”

“Extant bacteria and germs?”

“Hm. Possibly. I can certainly stimulate cell regeneration, so I suppose I could try the same with those.”

“Perhaps you could test it in a petri dish? Some samples in a solution. People die from sepsis. If you could get it to work in laboratory conditions, you could always try it on an opponent some time. Sometimes I wonder if you healed me.”

“Wha—oh,” Renato said, eyeing him speculatively. “If I did, it wasn’t a deliberate action. I don’t recall sitting down one day and thinking, ‘Maybe I can stimulate the growth of alternate pathways.’ I wouldn’t even know where to begin. But if I did, that’s a very interesting thought, too.”

He shrugged. “Or maybe you’re just that good.”

Renato leaned in for a serious sort of kiss.

Greyback was in Germany, according to successive uses of a locating spell by Hisui. They crossed the border and steadily got closer. “I think he’s in this forest,” he commented, not long after they arrived at Haslach. There was a dense patch of forest to the north. “How do you feel about being ninjas and going in through the tree tops?”

Renato nodded. “I always wanted to be a ninja.”

He snorted in amusement. “Well, let’s get something to eat first, I guess, and then we can head out?”

Renato nodded again and started looking around. An hour and a half later they were outside staring at the forest again. Once they got inside the tree line and out of casual sight, Hisui lifted them both to stand up high on a thick branch, then did another location spell. Thirty minutes later they were perched on another branch high up, having had fun leaping from tree to tree courtesy of altered personal gravity.

Renato turned his head to whisper into his ear. “I count thirty. Maybe more in some of those tents.”
But they’re eating, so…”

He nodded and turned to whisper back, “I am more than a little sickened to see in person just how many children there are. Unfortunately, I have no idea what Germany’s policies are on werewolves.”

“Look at them, though. They’re eating like savages and snarling at each other.”

He sighed softly. The odds of rehabilitation? Probably not worth calculating if they intended to remove a serious threat to mundanes and magics alike. He turned to whisper, “All right. I’ll start with Greyback. You start shooting those explosive rounds—left side first? I’ll explode those on the right. On the third tap. But beware if spells start coming this way. I have no idea what will happen if you shoot from inside any protection I throw up.”

Renato nodded, so Hisui got his lover’s rifle out of his extended pouch and handed it over. Once Renato was set and braced partially against the trunk, Hisui started the count by tapping the side of his foot against his lover’s. On three he reached out and decompressed Greyback’s head, then moved on to the next target. A few targets did emerge from the tents and were also taken care of.

When he could no longer sense any living beings down there he sighed. “All right. I’m going to clean up. Don’t know if any of their fluids can infect someone unfortunate enough to stumble over this, so…”

Renato nodded and started unloading the rifle, so Hisui used a singularity to sanitize the entire clearing, including a good inch of soil, then accepted the rifle back and stowed it away, along with the magazines. To be certain he lowered them both down to the ground and swept around for casings to likewise stow, simply on the off chance that some magical member of Greyback’s pack who had not been present showed up and could somehow use them to figure out how to find the user.

Since they were in Germany they decided to visit Berlin. It was not as though either of them were on a schedule. Renato sent a text to Antonio while they were waiting on transport. “I told him we’d give him the full story in Milan, but we were going to do a little sightseeing first.”

They found the magical district there without much trouble, not that they had been looking for it. It might have been the guy wearing a horrific mishmash of mundane clothing heading into a dodgy-looking establishment that most people passed right by that counted as a clue. Hisui stopped Renato with a hand on his arm, and discreetly pointed. “Only magics dress that discordantly in the mundane world.”

“Well, there’s a café right over there. How about we get something to eat and keep an eye on the place?”

He nodded, so they went over to ask for and get a window table. Over the time it took them to eat, which they did slowly, a half dozen more badly-dressed persons went into that same establishment, and several came out. Renato could only see people disappearing or appearing, which was a huge clue in favor of the idea of it being a gateway. Right after Renato handed over a credit card to pay the bill a couple showed up with a child in tow. The adults were confused, but the girl suddenly pointed and tugged on her mother’s hand. The girl led them in.

“I’d say that more or less confirms it,” he commented.

A short time later they were inside to look around. Maybe they would be mistaken for mundane-savvy in sartorial terms, but Hisui was not exactly worried about it. The gateway itself was small, much like some of the ones in Japan, and quickly opened out into the enclave itself, a long street with buildings lining either side.
“Good thing we know so many languages,” Renato mused, “or most of this would be lost on us. Same as when we were in Kyoto that first time?”

He nodded. They started going up the right-hand side, heading into any shops of vague interest, and eventually reached a bank at the far end. The street split, going off at angles to either side of the bank. The right side looked to devolve into less overtly-signed shops and housing. The left side looked dark and grimy in contrast. It sparked something in his memory. “This reminds me a lot of the one time I was taken to the alley in London,” he murmured. “I expect that side is something like their version of an underworld.”

“Really,” Renato drawled. “Let’s go look.”

So they did, with Hisui prepared to manifest a sphere at a moment’s notice if necessary, and keeping close to Renato so he would also be protected. There were hags, witches, and wizards, and all of them looked like they had not bathed in weeks or longer. The stench in that part of the enclave was horrid. Street vendors tried to sell them all manner of oddities and the shops specialized in peculiar trade, none of which was of interest.

“This is more of a joke than I expected,” Renato muttered.

“This is probably just the dregs, and shops with stuff that’s just dodgy instead of outright illegal. After seeing what’s here, I’d like to think the so-called ‘dark’ magicals have more sense than to set up shop in a place like this.”

Renato shrugged. “Well, whatever. What say we head back down the other side of the main street?”

He nodded and they turned around, began to walk back, but stopped dead when they heard a strange explosion. Hisui pivoted back to see clouds of smoke billowing from one of the doors, then a man darting out of the building, squealing in fear.

Renato’s sharp eyes caught movement near the door sill and pointed it out. It was a tiny little thing. “That’s … a chameleon?” he muttered.

The little fellow noticed them and headed their way with that peculiar walk chameleons had. Oddly, it had blood red eyes and a strange aura wisping off it like tatters of silken flames. Hisui reached out and grabbed the man, who gibbered in fear, drawing him inexorably closer.

Renato crouched down and eyed the beast, then started talking to it. Since Hisui could not understand any of it he turned his attention to the man. “What happened?” When the man simply babbled nonsensically he compressed him faintly in warning. “Talk.”

There had been an accident involving one of the man’s chameleons, a very recently discovered boggart in a cupboard, a dementor that had decided for some reason to look for a meal in the area instead of going off after easier prey, and the man’s panicked, uncontrolled magical outbursts in response.

He glanced back at Renato and the creature; they were conversing still. “I suggest you be more careful in the future,” he said to the man, releasing him. “Now get lost.”

The man caught sight of the creature, shrieked, and fled down the street.

He moved back to his lover, his gait hitching slightly when the creature turned a baleful eye his way.

Renato glanced at him briefly, but kept his main focus on the creature. “This little one seems amazingly intelligent.”
“I don’t know if you were listening, but I think it’s part boggart, part dementor, however in hell that’s possible. Potentially shape-shifting, fear-finding, and soul-sucking.”

Renato clucked his tongue and started conversing with the little fellow again, so Hisui kept an eye on their surroundings. They came to some kind of agreement, because the next thing he knew the “chameleon” was ambling over to crawl onto Renato’s hand, and allowed itself to be planted on his lover’s hat.

Hisui just shook his head in bemusement. “Well, you did want a super cool chameleon.”

Renato grinned.

“But I wonder how Leon will react.”

The grin slipped off his lover’s face. “The present Leon is … getting on in years. I’m not sure it will matter, for long, anyway. I’m more concerned about Yori’s reaction.”

He reached over to give a little tug to Renato’s sleeve and started walking back toward the shopping area proper. “I guess we’ll know when we get him home. Dementors and boggarts are classified as amortal non-beings. There’s a very good chance that this little one won’t die, or at least have a vastly extended lifespan. Never run across something like this. Hard to say what effect there’d be with the inclusion of a mortal creature to the mix. I wonder what he eats.” He grimaced at the idea of finding neighbors with their souls sucked out or fleeing in screaming terror because the creature shape-shifted into their worst fears.

“He has a strange accent,” Renato said, “but yeah, I’ll have to ask. Right now he’s a little confused. I think the chameleon brain has precedence because of the shape he ended up in. Amortal?”

“Not classified as alive or dead, really, and no natural deaths. Creatures of that ilk tend to be formed or created instead of born. Our little friend here is unique, and I have to wonder at the odds of us being in the right place, so to speak. Dementors were ‘native’ to Britain, from quite a ways back, due to some psycho or other, but things got shook up because of Big Evil. The only place I think they can’t be found now is in the tropics. I have a book on it somewhere you can read if you want.”

By then they were back in the alley proper and began to check over the new offerings, but aside from a handful of books they found nothing of particular interest. A few more days in Berlin saw them starting the journey to Milan. Hisui considered simply apparating them in stages, but he was unsure how the most recent Leon would handle it, so they took trains.

Antonio met them at the suite they had secured in a hotel owned by the Vongola through various fronts. “Good to see you two back,” he said.

Renato hummed, then said, “The short version of the hit is that the target was tracked to a forest in Germany. We went in using the trees as a highway, and scoped out the situation from above. Unfortunately he had around thirty-five weres with him of varying ages, all acting like something out of Lord of the Flies. After a discussion of how best to handle the conditions, we took all of them out, then cleaned up. I expect if anyone in that pack was elsewhere, they’d come back to something of a mystery.”

Antonio nodded. “Above and beyond, but personally, I think it was the right call. After learning more about werewolves, I have to say they scare me silly. His type, anyway. I suppose like with anything else, there’s probably civilized ones.”

“I know of at least one,” Hisui said. “That was forever ago, though. Still alive from what I’ve heard,
so he’s probably still playing normal human as much as possible.”

Antonio handed over one of the usual cards. “There may be another one. Depends on what Nono has to say once I’ve reported in. He did say… Since you two are really our only insight to the magical world, he wanted to know if you’d keep me updated on any events that might impact us, so I can pass them on.”

He nodded. It would mean spending more time in one of the enclaves, but perhaps he could just pay for papers to be delivered to the house in Namimori and go over them every weekend to compile a report. On the other hand, doing that would mean someone somewhere would know a magical was living there, and that did not sit well with him. Buying them personally it was, then.

“Let me know when you two are ready to return to Japan. Nono is making his jet available again, since you came here at his request.” He left shortly after.

“Well, we’re here on an impromptu holiday,” Renato said. “Yori and Leon are set at the house for a bit yet. We can afford to stay a bit longer. Up for it?”

“Sure.”

As it was so close by they swung through Pavia to visit with Shamal, who seemed happy enough to see them, even if he did sort of hitch in his greeting, on seeing Hisui, and remembering that he was not, in fact, female. It was not until after they were seated in the same restaurant as before that Shamal said, “I’ve been hearing some fascinating ghost stories lately. It’s almost enough to revive my interest in the supernatural.”

Renato’s mouth twisted into an amused smirk. “That’s the thing about ghosts. You often can’t even see them, even when they’re right there hovering over your shoulder. The way I hear it, they usually only come out when they’re about to scare you to death.”

Shamal eyed Renato with a mixture of curiosity and frustration. “You would know, I suppose.”

“Oh, I’ve had my run-ins with ghosts.”

Hisui looked away, then paused. He tapped his lover’s arm and gestured discreetly at a flickering red aura peeking out over the half walls of a table across the room. The sound of a voice was rising steadily. Shamal also turned to look, and Hisui could see him blink in surprise.

“Shit,” Shamal muttered, then gave Hisui a sharp, searching look.

He ignored him and continued to eye the disturbance.

“Sounds like a Storm is brewing,” Renato observed quietly. “Too bad we can’t see who, precisely. Italian, proper accent, so a native, or had a really good teacher. Sounds young.”

“Not so young that I can’t tell it’s a boy,” Shamal said.

Their waitress wandered by at that moment with plates of food and, after she set them down, Renato did something under the table that caused Shamal’s face to twist in pain, then smiled charmingly at the woman. “Is everything all right over there?” he asked, jutting his chin toward the other table for a second.

She got a resigned look on her face and glanced over her shoulder. “It happens often enough. Marco is a firecracker. Signore Varano has his hands full with that one.” She shook her head. “Anything else I can get for you?”
Renato aimed another smile at her and shook his head. The second she wandered off he had his phone out and was sending a text message to Antonio. Hisui simply started eating his meal, keeping an eye on the disturbance in his peripheral vision.

Shamal stared at him again.

He glanced back over his shoulder, then said, “You seeing a yūrei back there? Because I want to know if this is my last meal.”

“I don’t fucking believe it,” Shamal muttered. “You’re active. And—”

“That’s a piss-poor way to treat good food,” Renato pointed out, nodding at Shamal’s plate. “I know I invited you and all, but I’m not paying for your share if you waste it.”

Shamal frowned at the diversion and began eating, casting the occasional sharply curious look his way, but confined himself to safe topics of conversation, such as how his degree work was going, or how many women he had seduced recently. “What are you doing in Italy again, anyway?”

“What? I’m not allowed to return to my home country?”

Shamal grunted. “Half your home country.”

“I’ve lived more years here than in France, so…” Renato countered.

“Oh, sure, split hairs, why don’t you,” Shamal complained. “Wait a minute. You didn’t answer my question.”

“I did,” Renato insisted.

“You—damn it,” Shamal cursed. “You’re trying to distract me, divert my attention. We’ve known each other for how many years? You should know better that it doesn’t work for long.” He eyed Hisui again.

He leaned sideways and said to Renato quietly, “I am starting to think he swings both ways. Should I be concerned for my virtue?”

Renato chuckled and had some wine. “Oh, tesoro. He knows I’d kill him in a heartbeat. Or just emasculate him if I was feeling generous.”

He played along. “You’re so sweet, Ren-koi.”

Shamal’s countenance kept darkening at the diversion.

“But you know I can take care of myself.”

Renato chuckled again and reached over to stroke the back of his neck briefly.

Hisui looked over with a faint smile and did a double-take. Bizarro Leon was wisping again, only that time the flames were reaching out toward Shamal.

Renato looked up, almost going cross-eyed in his attempt to understand what he was seeing, and slowly followed the flow to Shamal. The moment they touched the man it was like a switch flipped. The bad mood and frustration all bled away in the heartbeat it took for those dark wisps of flame to touch him and then retreat.

“Well now, isn’t that interesting.”
“Did he do what I think he did?” Renato asked, staring at the chameleon.

He joined in the staring. “Sure seemed like it. Didn’t seem harmful at first glance, but…”

“But if we’d had him then,” Renato replied, “you might never have made that breakthrough.”

“Possibly. It remains to be seen if he will do it to either of us, or just others. It certainly made Shamal’s mind skip tracks.”

Renato nodded and slumped onto the sofa in their suite, then initiated another conversation with his little friend, so Hisui went off to consider while taking in the view out the window. He was going to have to dig out his books on magical creatures and beings, even if boggarts and dementors were considered non-beings. ‘Just as well a lethifold wasn’t in there, too,’ he thought, ‘because this is one bizarre little beast. If it subsists on emotions, though… That’s kind of frightening. Just negative ones? Or more?’

“He says he didn’t like where Shamal’s thoughts were going, so he fixed it.”

He turned away from the window and went to sit down next to his lover. “So he was defending you?”

“Sort of. He’s not technically a he, any longer, but neither is he a she. But he started out as a he, so…”

His eyes crossed briefly. “Leon still works as a name.”

Renato nodded. “Well, we’ll figure it out. And he was defending both of us, actually. He recognizes that we’re a pairing. But since you can’t talk to him directly…”

“I have this feeling,” he said.

Renato eyed him warily. “About Leon?”

“No. About Nono. About Big Evil.”

“You think we’re going to end up over there.”

He nodded. “It’s just a feeling. But first we need to go home and introduce this little fellow. Whatever it is, I’m sure it will find us.”

The pets got on surprisingly well. Leon and Yori took Bizarro Leon under their wings, so to speak, and socialized the little guy, explained how things worked, along with help from Renato. He surprised them all when he morphed into the shape of a kneazel. The tuft on Yori’s tail puffed out and his hair stood on end, but he quickly settled down to interrogate this oddity.

While he was preparing dinner that night Bizarro Leon watched with interest and morphed from his cat shape into the knife Hisui was holding, though there was a set of blood red eyes peeking out from
the handle. Hisui just shook his head after a moment and kept working, but his lover was having
raptures.

“Wow. That’s super cool! I wonder what else he can mimic,” Renato said, eyeing his latest pet.
“Maybe after dinner you can materialize a bunch of stuff to see what he can do?”

“Sure.” And he did. Just like a boggart, Bizarro Leon had no trouble with morphing into anything he
materialized, but his eyes were always visible, always blood red, and he was never any colour other
than green unless he was in a living form, and even then he was faintly tinted green.

“Well, that would make it easier to sneak him into places,” Renato mused.

“You can be a ninja with a Leon forehead protector,” he joked.

Renato looked disturbingly pleased by the idea. “Or a police officer with a Leon baton.” He paused.
“Except that I’m not sure how he’d feel about being slammed into someone.”

“I don’t think they use leaf green batons, Ren-ko,” he murmured.

“Hm. Perhaps not. Well, you still have a fair amount of holiday time left. What shall we do?”

“Aside from taking on the odd job? Let’s work on you being able to charge runes with your flames.”

“But I like the way you feel up my gun!” Renato protested laughingly.

He sighed, but could not help the smile that flitted over his lips.

He sighed. “I am tired of all this.”

Renato squeezed his arm and pulled him a little closer. “School?”

“Yes. Is there even any point in getting a higher degree? I can probably get all the translation jobs I
want through contacts and build up a reputation, and from there get them from outsiders if I wanted.
I’m just so bored with all of it. I know more about languages than ninety-nine percent of the people
there already. I’m just missing the cultural aspects of it all.”

“Well, I only got a mastery because I love mathematics as much as I do and because I could. You
know what I use it all for. True, I have something of a reputation out there, but that’s under an alias. I
think if you want to stop once you get your degree you should. A mastery or doctorate might be a
nice thing to have, but I’m not really seeing what it would get you in the end. As it is, it’s another
year and a half for your undergraduate degree.”

He groaned.

“There’s plenty of things you can occupy yourself with,” Renato said soothingly. “Tons of things I
can teach you. Plenty of things we could learn together. For example, we now know that a flame-
user can charge runes. What about, say, protective clothing? Is there anything in that head of yours
about runes of protection? That might be effective against other flame-users? Because really, that one
job you told me about—the very idea of some snot-nosed brat disintegrating my skin because they
were in a snit… Oo, what about runic tattoos?”

He turned a little and stared at his lover. “Where does he get these ideas?”
“That’s an intriguing idea,” Renato continued. “Though not something I’d be inclined to share, should it be possible. Have to have an edge, after all, right? Exceptional talent is one thing, but it’s best to be the ones who always walk away unscathed, if possible. If we had that sort of thing in our bag of tricks, well…” His lover shifted so he could eye him more easily. “I know you have plenty of books on runes. How about we make that our next project? Clothing, and then perhaps the concept of tattoos?”

He stared some more, then nodded. “But each flame type is different,” he protested quietly. “They have different properties. That would require some serious work for clothing, because…” He trailed off, thinking hard about the presented challenge. Normal thread didn’t take magic well, but there were things that could be used as thread that did. But that would result in some very odd looking clothing. Perhaps acromantula silk? That at least could be dyed, and if they had fabric done up in a mixture of that silk and other materials…

‘Well,’ he thought, ‘the amount of silk running through things would spread out the influence of the runes, and silk is naturally resistant in the first place, but the runes themselves should accept charging… I think. Tattoos, on the other hand, would use the medium of skin itself, as a contiguous expanse, and if flames were powering them… But what about the ink?’

He blinked back to awareness when Renato leaned in to give him a kiss.

“That feeling is back.”

Renato looked at him sharply. “Then I expect we should pack for a trip. All our fabulous toys. Just in case.”

Two days later Antonio stopped by the house. “I hate to say it, but we have something of a situation. This is a request,” he stressed, then opened his little briefcase and produced one of those Sky Flame-sealed envelopes to hand over.

‘Must have been messengered over,’ he thought, ‘or he flew all the way to Italy and back to personally courier the thing.’

Renato accepted it and broke the seal, slipped out the paper inside, and held it open between them. Hisui’s first reaction was to squint, then quite nearly groan. “Kami-sama,” he muttered. “I was right. I didn’t want to be right.”

“Yes,” Renato said quietly. “One thing leads to another, I guess.”

Nono had sent in agents to England, to deal with some lower level politicians who were drumming up support for measures which would negatively impact Vongola interests. Nothing out of the ordinary; in fact, they had both done jobs of that nature. Far too many politicians proposed or voted with their personal interests in mind, and not those of their constituents, or the interests of those bribing them, and half of those didn’t even know where their bribe money was really coming from.

Hisui was not opposed to those jobs so long as there was clear evidence that the target or targets were clearly reprehensible in some way, though he preferred something more straightforward. If he wanted to be involved in politics he would have tried to find other Flames of the Earth and headed his own famiglia.

The problem came in when there was an attack. One of the agents got away and was able to report back that it had been magicals and, not just any magicals. They had been wearing masks, of a sort he
supposed would be frightening to “peaceful” magicals, simply due to what they represented. The agents who had not gotten away had either been killed or kidnapped.

“Why take them?” Renato asked, then immediately added, “Torture? Taking out their sadistic tendencies on what they liken to diseased filth or subhuman creatures?”

“Well, they did attack any number of mundanes during his initial rise. And that was starting back in 1970. It’s come and gone in waves, but the papers seem to be indicating another upswing. I think it’s more worrying that he’s gone after the government.”

“Maybe he thinks that by doing so he’ll distract his opponents away from what he’s doing on the magical side?” Renato hazarded.

He shrugged. “Does it matter? Nono wants payback for his agents. That’s a huge job. He doesn’t outright say it, but he’s asking for us to go in there and kill off a commensurate number of Death Eaters, if not Big Evil himself, never mind that I already killed the bastard once, even if he did have some way to pop back up. If I remember correctly—”

“You always do,” Renato interrupted.

“—he’s mostly stayed away from Diagon Alley, which is a bit odd, really, but I suppose even Death Eaters need to shop, and not all of them can afford to go abroad. Portkeys don’t grow on trees, and you need to have permission to cross borders using them, though I expect Death Eaters wouldn’t care about that minor legal issue. There’s also the issue of finding them.” He paused long enough to light a cigarette and take a long drag, then suddenly realized Antonio was sitting there patiently. “Can I get you something to eat? This discussion may take a while.”

“I’m fine,” Antonio assured them.

He shrugged again. “All right. Depending on what protections they’re under…”

“There are ways,” Renato said vaguely.

“True. I wonder how those kinds of protections would stand up to some good old incendiary devices or rocket launchers. I can imagine getting some satisfaction out of burning them to the ground.”

Renato shook his head. “Burning? Probably not. Explosions, on the other hand? Very possibly. You’ve shown me common schemata, and every last one of them protects against fire.”

“But not explosions—or perhaps I mean to say, the physical and concussive effects of an explosion.” He glanced at the letter again. “Five agents died or were taken. Odds are those kidnapped are already dead, but—Antonio, do you have information on those men?”

“…I can get it.”

“If you would.”

Antonio brought out his phone and started texting.

“You do realize you’re getting caught up in the challenge of this,” Renato commented with a sly little grin.

He scowled. “You don’t exactly seem to be objecting.”

“I greatly dislike the idea of going to that country. But—a part of me is interested in causing a little
mayhem, and against a people who richly deserve it. I was never thrilled about having to avoid England and France. Anyone who’s under the fidelius, though…”

He started to nod, but checked himself. “We can always keep triggering Snatchers until there aren’t any more, which might bring in the remaining Death Eaters.”

Renato hummed. “We can try bazookas with HEAT warheads,” he mused.

He gave his lover a skeptical look. “Isn’t that against your religion?”

“So I let you fire them,” Renato said with a shrug.

He rolled his eyes slightly. “So how do you want to do this? Just wipe out every minion we can find? Go for Big Evil if we stumble over him?”

“If we go there, we might as well. It’s fairly obvious that the good guys are only good enough to hold the line.”

“Zabini said, ‘The Order seems to have figured out the Dark Lord’s secret.’ If we do manage to get lucky enough to both find him and take him down, it might be for good this time. Or it might not.” He shrugged.

“So, we’re going.”

“Sure.”

“I may have to kill you after this,” he said mildly. He was tricked out in a woman’s kimono and light makeup again, but this time the strip around his neck had runes on the inside to alter his voice.

“Tesoro,” Renato said mournfully. “You are incredibly pretty this way, but I am hopelessly enamored of a man, so you’ll have to ditch the disguise before I’ll make love to you again.”

“You just wanted to see me in drag again,” he muttered, then sighed. “Let’s go.”

They took a cab to Charing Cross Road and entered the Leaky Cauldron, Hisui holding his lover’s hand to introduce him to and bring him through the protections. The interior of the place was as he remembered, but what he was not sure of was whether a controlled burst of magic would open the archway into the alley itself. That being so, he reached out and lifted a wand off an inattentive patron and had it follow them down near the floor, where it would be less likely to be noticed.

He did not want to touch the damn thing, but he would if he had to. He noticed in his peripheral vision that Renato was trying very hard not to sneer at the condition of the pub as they walked through toward the back. He couldn’t blame him; the place was a pigsty by their standards. Once they made it to the little courtyard out back—which was also filthy—he brought up the memory of having seen the wall before, then hovered his finger over the correct brick and pushed his magic forward.

The moment the archway started to form he sent the wand back inside and left it against one of the walls. Renato’s eyes went a bit wide again, betraying his surprise. Once it finished forming they moved through and started the business of roaming through shops, listening intently to everything, and generally being touristy. It was in Flourish and Blotts that he ran into a little trouble. They were browsing different isles at the time, which was not uncommon.
“Well now,” he heard murmured off to the side. “Who is this delicious little Far East morsel?”

He pretended not to have heard and continued to check over book titles, though his concentration for mining information was shot to hell. All he could see in his peripheral vision was a man with longish, dark hair. Suddenly, the man was standing at his side, angled toward him, with one hand going out to rest against the offerings, a far too intimate posture.

“So, may I know your name? I’m Sirius Black.” His tone just purred with a promise Hisui did not want to contemplate.

He slowly looked over with a politely confused expression. 「I don’t understand. Why are you bothering me?」

Black took on a confused look himself and blinked a few times. “You don’t speak English?” he said slowly.

「I do not understand you.」 he said, trying not to show his amusement. His own godfather was hitting on him—or trying to. Though, for all he knew, that was no longer the case. It was not something he had ever bothered to research, and if the man had been removed from that position, it had not affected him to his knowledge—or he had been too far away for it to be felt? Was the position even magical? 『Ren-koi!』 he called. 『Could you come assist me, please?』

Renato appeared from around the side and eyed the situation. 『Do I even want to know?』

He glanced over with a small smile. 『I do not understand his language, so…』

Renato smiled back, then moved to wrap an arm around Hisui possessively and turned his focus toward the interloper. “Was there something you needed?” he asked coolly.

Black immediately backed off, either because the lady was taken, or because Renato’s demeanor was screaming, “Don’t fuck with me.”

『How droll,』 he commented. 『I will explain later, away from here.』

Renato nodded and stuck by him, simply choosing to investigate the books on that aisle. A short time later they were back out on the street and walking slowly along to the next amusement, still listening carefully to everything being said around them.

They poked into the Hopping Pot and decided that it was far cleaner and less distasteful than the Leaky Cauldron, so they entered and Renato ordered them butterbeer to sip while they occupied a table and eavesdropped on the other patrons. The junk shop was so disorganized and dusty that they immediately turned around and left again.

They passed by James and Lily Potter as they came back down from Carkitt Market and passed by Gringotts, and he was sorely tempted to arrange their deaths right then. As it was he tapped Renato’s arm and waved an airy hand in their direction, to ensure his lover noticed them.

Fortescue’s was doing a reasonably brisk business, so they entered and approached the counter, eyeing what was on offer. When the proprietor got to them he took in what Hisui was wearing, blinked, and smiled. 『I had a cousin who spent a lot of time in Japan. Said it was a lovely place, always liked to visit. Found her true love there.』

Hisui’s brow went up. 『It is, thank you.』

『What can I get you two?』 the man said with another smile.
He glanced back down at the case. 「Ano... vanilla fudge brownie, please, in a bowl.」

「The same.」 Renato said, then paid with coins he had earlier stolen.

They sat down again to eat and listen, then continued on with their self-imposed mission.

When they finally did get back to their hotel suite he went straight to the bedroom and stripped, then hastened into the bathroom to shower. Only once he was properly attired again—Renato had carefully packed away the outfit for him—and had slumped onto the sofa did he explain anything.

「Kami-sama, what a day,」 he said wearily. 「The man who tried to hit on me? That was my godfather, of all people.」

Renato laughed, but his amusement cut off suddenly. 「Wait. That means—」

「Yes.」

「James Potter is your father?」 Renato whispered.

「Yes」 he said, heaving a sigh.

「Holy—shit, tesoro, I'm so sorry. That—that really sucks.」

He nodded. 「I kind of wanted to kill them while we were there.」

Renato snorted. 「But you weren’t stupid enough to do it right there in public as an obvious foreigner. We can always arrange for an accident later, tesoro,」 he said, waving a hand around. 「If you want them dead, we’ll get it done. Now, I didn’t hear a lot of value while we were there. People are too damn scared to say much of anything aside from commenting on the weather and the price of potions ingredients.」

「Same. So... We go with the Snatcher idea?」

「Agreed.」

His efforts to track the missing agents were fruitless, and they concluded that they had been killed. He made sure (again) that his extended pouch had every armament known to man that they might need, a ton of healing supplies (hopefully not needed, as if he had to use any on Renato it would mean a steady infusion of his own magic to make them work), and various other goodies before they set out. They had chosen Dartmoor Forest to start their game, found a clearing, and checked it over thoroughly.

Hisui materialized a human figure—the largest object he had ever created—and threw some clothes and a hat on it (thanking the gods that he could just levitate the thing to make dressing it easier) to help disguise that it was made of glass and not a real person. Maybe he should have just purchased or stolen some mannequins; perhaps he still would. Renato was up in a tree, blending into the foliage; he was ridiculously good at that sort of thing.

He went ahead and spoke the name, then flew up into a different tree. Five rough-looking men appeared a short time later and oriented on the decoy, then prepared to cast. Hisui yanked away their wands and flattened them to the ground, and held them in place, face down, while Renato dropped down and kicked the first one in the ribs. What followed was a brutal interrogation, and then death. Each of the Snatchers were thusly treated.

「So at least now we have an idea of their numbers, plus one of their camps. I say we save time and
just wipe that one out, then start with the Taboo again,” Renato opined.

He nodded. “Sure. Saving time is good. The quicker we can get this done, the quicker we can get the hell out of this country.”

Every Snatcher they captured was ruthlessly interrogated and that information used to track down more of them. True, they had yet to get to the actual Death Eaters, but that would come in time, once the bully boy support system was wiped out of existence.

After the tenth round of Snatcher baiting Death Eaters started to show up with them. That was a bonus. Hisui encased the first one in obsidian while they dealt with the Snatchers, leaving enough room for the man’s chest to move for breathing and to hold the man’s mask in place. “I wonder if he’ll respond as well to torture,” he mused, eyeing his little fake statue.

He did. He might have been a “proper” Death Eater, but he was still a low-level one and not nearly as well-trained as one of the upper echelon, nor as resistant to pain. Unfortunately, he was unable to tell them of the location where Big Evil was camping out, though he did give plenty of names for them to take note of. They kept his mask as something to deliver to Nono when everything was over.

Renato immediately started making plans to blow certain properties sky high.

Two weeks later they had exhausted Big Evil’s supply of Snatchers and were only pulling in Death Eaters, which was something of a relief. Still low-level lackeys, but the more they disposed of the more panicked their boss would become. All of those masks were kept, too. Renato argued that they should switch over to taking on bigger prey, and Hisui agreed, so they sat down in their rental and planned out a campaign.

Avery Manor went down in a hail of explosives. Renato had set up bazookas in a circle around the perimeter, and Hisui set them all off with his power. The building was shredded by the sheer amount of firepower they sent at it, but he did not stop to admire any of it. He was too busy speeding from weapon to weapon, shoving them into his pouch, and then meeting up with his lover.

They did the same to Carrow, Gibbon, and Jugson, though their homes were much smaller and less ostentatious. Crabbe and Goyle had been killed during Snatcher raids, both fathers and sons, so they left the widows alone. In between planning out more destruction they kept triggering the Taboo and wasting more Death Eaters. Evil minions were apparently too stupid to stop responding to the trigger, or still managing to capture enough of their “enemies” to accept their losses.

“Dios mio, the good guys must be seriously incompetent,” Renato said one evening. “No, I know, their so-called leader is all about justice. The man is obviously insane if he thinks torturing people with the dementors left at Azkaban is justice. The only reason he’s still alive at this point is he’s so good at defensive fighting. For all his power he hasn’t even cleaned up their ministry, so that half the ones who do get captured don’t somehow manage to conveniently escape before being imprisoned, or buy their way out of it.”

“I don’t disagree,” he replied. “The man’s got a skewed sense of reality. But that’s part of why I never wanted to be associated with them. Living in that world warps your mind, makes you into a naïve little sheep or a manipulative bastard on a power high.” He shook his head. “At least the people back home are mostly sane, unlike these inbred idiots. Too much of Europe just doesn’t have the cultural history to handle it.”

“I don’t disagree,” Renato parroted back with a smile. “Who would you like to go after next?”

The Yaxley house crumbled, then those of Macnair, Rowle, and Travers. Big Evil was losing his
better men at a ridiculous rate, people who had lasted time and time again against the opposition. Hisui had built up quite a collection of masks by that point.

When they went after Malfoy Manor they ran into an interesting occurrence. All the bazookas had been set up and Hisui triggered them, then sped off on his rounds to collect and stow them. It was not until after he had rejoined Renato that he realized someone else had arrived; the Order, to be exact, and half of them had gone down to shrapnel, including his parents.

Hisui exchanged a look with his lover, shrugged, and apparated them away. The newspaper the following day told the story, how James and Lily Potter had bled out on the scene, along with several other Order members. They had been there to conduct a raid, despite half of them not being aurors.

“How do you feel?” Renato asked, his arm around Hisui’s shoulders.

“How about them? Empty. Seeing them in Diagon Alley—there was still that desire to see them dead, some bitterness. But now? Nothing. Their eldest son is old enough to fend for himself, unless they ruined him. Not my problem.”

Renato nodded and leaned in to kiss his cheek, right in front of his ear. “Let’s take the day off,” he whispered, letting his fingers dance along Hisui’s arm.

A slight smile starting creeping up and he nodded. “Will you spoil me?”

“Your heart’s desire, tesoro,” Renato promised.

“I could be convinced,” he admitted.

“Really.” Renato shifted position and nibbled on his ear lobe. “I’ll talk you into it,” he purred, then shifted again, so he could pick Hisui up and move them both to the bedroom.

The next morning he was feeling deliciously spoiled and ready to see about trying to coax Big Evil out of hiding. “It’s almost cheating,” he said during breakfast. “They have no clue about any of us from what I can tell. No way to defend themselves. We’ve pulled the trigger how many times now? And they still don’t respond any differently? It’s pathetic.”

“I’m not going to complain,” Renato replied. “I usually prefer a challenge, but I’m perfectly willing to accept that these people are generally incompetent. Even against less skilled mafiosi these people would be at a disadvantage. They’re just too slow and physically inadequate. Spells don’t move as fast as bullets. And having a reputation for being hardcore sadists doesn’t do much if the people they’re facing aren’t afraid. But… Let’s stop there.”

He felt a momentary sense of confusion. “What—oh. The ministry would still be an issue, but that’s really not our concern.”

“Right.”

They started in again with the Taboo, continuing to switch locations each time so as not to allow the Death Eaters (assuming any of them had the brains to) a chance to prepare the battlefield to their advantage when they weren’t around. One of the Death Eaters they caught on an island in Loch Enoch was Severus Snape. The names they had thus far obtained included his, and a description, so he was fairly certain the greasy-haired man presently pressed face-first on the ground was him. The stains on his fingers were also a clue.

He sent a signal to Renato before they began the interrogations, and moved close enough so he could whisper into his lover’s ear. “I think that’s Snape. I’m considering trying to plant a tracker on him
and accidentally losing my grip while you’re questioning the others, allowing him to apparate away. Maybe I can figure out approximately where Big Evil is hiding. What do you think?”

Renato turned his head so he could whisper back. “The one you said you overheard those two arguing about? We can try it. You’ve already disposed of their wands and I don’t think they need them to teleport. Granted, he might have a spare, or other weapons, but… I guess you can just flatten him again and we treat him like the others if that happens. What if he can feel the tracker, though? Would he risk going back to base?”

He frowned.

“There’s also the issue of him seeing our faces.”

He shook his head slightly and turned to whisper back. “You’re right. And I’ve never bothered with any illusion magic aside from invisibility. Neither of us has Mist Flames. I suppose I could fashion us masks, but your first point is… All right, let’s do this the same as always, then.”

Renato nodded and moved to the first captive.

Once they finished, with masks collected and tucked away, and the bodies disposed of, they returned to their most recent suite, which was never anywhere near their ambush location. “Do you think it’d be possible to use flames as a tracker?”

Renato looked exceptionally thoughtful at the idea. “Make something small for me.”

A brow went up, but he did as requested, materializing a small obsidian sphere.

Renato picked it up and said, “I’ll be back.” A short time later he re-entered the suite and took a seat.

“How about we try this? We visit Diagon Alley again, see if we can find any of those suspected Death Eaters wandering around, and try a two-fold approach. You do something like pierce through their cloak with a senbon or something that would stay in place, and I direct some insects to ride along in their pocket. If you can’t sense where your plant is, the insects can still enlist others in the area to help figure out the location. So long as we stick to one place for a reasonable amount of time…”

He nodded. “That sounds like it might work. And if we find it, we can blow it sky high. Though if Big Evil is any good at all he’ll have a fallback position, assuming we didn’t already decimate it.” Then he paused and groaned. “Great. I get to cross-dress again.”

Renato grinned unrepentantly. “Well, that simply means that you should look into some books on illusions once we’re home.”

The second trip to Diagon Alley went more smoothly, if only because there was no older man creepily trying to put the moves on him. While they were enjoying ice cream at one of the tables outside Fortescue’s, a slender blonde woman did a double-take on seeing them and sat down in an empty chair.

His brow went up, and she took that as an invitation to say, “Have you ever been to Kobe?”
Hisui played dumb and looked at Renato, who “interpreted” for him, then said, 「Yes.」

She brightened. 「Oh, wonderful! The reason I ask is that Daddy, my husband, and I had been considering going there to investigate a lead on a wrackspurt infestation.」

「Ano… I do not think I have heard of this before.」

She smiled. 「It’s a creature that floats in through your ears and makes your brain go fuzzy.」

He exchanged a look with Renato. 「Well, that might explain why there are so many crazy people in Kobe.」

「Are you sure they’re crazy? Maybe they’re just confused and misunderstood,」 the woman said, a faint frown crinkling her brow. 「They can only been seen with special glasses.」

「We don’t spend a lot of time in Kobe, so I’m afraid we don’t really know.」

She hummed thoughtfully and nodded. 「Still, it’s a possibility. I shall have to tell them! Thank you!」 She hopped up, gave them a little wave, and wandered away.

「Such interesting people here,」 Renato commented dryly.

They spotted Lucius Malfoy emerging from Gringotts a little while later, which occasioned an exchange of looks between them. Hisui went ahead and materialized a senbon and sent it over to weave itself into the fabric of the man’s robes, and Renato sent his insects. Malfoy went into Slug & Jiggers and exited fifteen minutes later, then found a quiet spot off to the side and disapparated.

Renato immediately placed a hand at his waist, in case they needed to move, he presumed. He concentrated, no longer really seeing anything in front of him, and tried to reach out to sense where the senbon was. “North-northwest,” he whispered, “mostly. A little more north than that, not as far west as Edinburgh.” He frowned and looked at his lover. “I can’t sense how far, though.”

“All right. Let’s return to our suite.”

Once they were there he changed, washed up, and packed away the outfit, then went out to see that Renato was studying a map and using the side of a hotel notepad as a ruler. His lover looked up when he appeared and said, “Just for the hell of it, can you sense the cat statue?”

He blinked and took a seat, then sat back and closed his eyes to better concentrate. After several minutes of effort he sighed and shook his head. “No.”

Renato started muttering to himself and jotting down notes on the pad. “We’ll give it some time, see what the insects manage to bring back. If necessary we’ll do this the hard way and run some tests to determine just how far you can sense. That’ll narrow it down. And if we have to we can question people along the line. I wouldn’t doubt if Big Evil is holed up in some town, that the locals probably have some tales to tell about mysterious happenings.”

A week and a half later they were in a place called Little Hangleton, in the Hanged Man pub. They heard all about the local gossip after one of the men there drinking overheard Renato regaling Hisui with an entirely fictitious tale about a ghost that supposedly haunted a small town in France. The man, already half-potted, shared with them the events of ages past in their otherwise sleepy little town, about how the Riddles had been murdered one night and the culprit never found, and how the big mansion atop the hill overlooking the village disappeared. Some said it had burnt down overnight to naught but ash, even thought it was built of stone. Renato skillfully coaxed more details out of the man, even bought him a round, and they left with the idea that they had found it—or at least a place
where Big Evil had once been.

They took a walk after that, exploring the village, and eyeing the hill. There might not visibly be a house there, but something was. He could tell that just by how gravity was being affected, and whispered that to Renato.

“This one will be a lot harder,” Renato whispered back. “Not like it’s in the middle of nowhere. On the other hand, it seems the people here are used to weird things happening, so maybe they’ll just add it to the gossip roster.”

They reached the edge of the village and paused, seemingly looking out over the area. In reality Renato had called a number of flying insects to him to ask for their help. They flew away and the two of them turned around to walk slowly back the other way. An hour later (and wasn’t that fun trying to stretch time in such a small place) the insects were back and reporting to Renato.

“There are Death Eaters in there,” his lover whispered. “Let’s find a quiet spot and go back for now.”

In the suite they discussed what to have for dinner, Renato ordered room service, and they sat down to wait.

“Same plan?”

“Good question,” Renato said. “What are the odds that he’s figured out how to prevent physical attacks? Hm. If he has, well…”

He sat back as his lover went off into some mental space filled with calculations. He answered the door when a knock came, pulled the cart in, handed over a tip, then shut the door again. The cart was rolled over to the sofa and unloaded onto the table, and Hisui sat back down again. When Renato did not snap out of his dream world he poked him in the side before starting to eat.

“I say we do it.”

“Sure.”

They set everything up, Hisui set them off, then sped off to reclaim the weapons and rejoin his lover. They were admiring the fact that not only had the manor house suddenly reappeared, but that it was now a shambles, when a blood-curdling scream of anger and frustration could be heard.

“Ano…” Hisui quickly disillusioned Renato and himself, then eyed the ruin. A few more pieces of the walls fell in, and then, accompanied by a great deal of dust, part of the rubble exploded outward to reveal a bald man with no nose and blood red eyes, who looked incandescent with fury. “You try first,” he suggested.

He heard the sound of his lover readying his gun, then the shot. It was perfect, dead center between the eyes. Unfortunately, the target had some kind of invisible shield against physical objects up. “Shit,” Renato muttered. “Your turn.”

Hisui frowned, then reached out and exploded the man’s head. The body teetered and slowly toppled over. Five minutes later there was still no movement, but there were sirens in the distance. “I got a decent look at him. I might be able to try a location spell. Not sure it will work with a fake name, though.”

“So try it on me with a fake name.”
“Ano…” For some reason, his mind went blank trying to think one up. Then he tried using Yamada Taro with his lover’s face in mind. It worked, but… Next he tried the man behind the bar at the Leaky Cauldron. He knew his given name—Tom—but not his family name, so that was perhaps a better test. The locator directed him toward London. He then tried the man he had just partially exploded, using the pub man’s given name and the family name associated with the manor they had just shredded; nothing. “I think he might actually be dead this time,” he murmured.

They backed off a distance when fire engines roared up the drive leading to the house. The body was discovered—they could tell because of the reactions of the men there—and watched as it was lifted onto a gurney. That there was a body at all said everything. “You ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Hisui disapparated them, back to the suite.

“So, we spend a few days checking the papers.”

He nodded. “Then we go see Nono, and then home.”

Two days later there was a report in the paper that served Little Hangleton with an update on the mysterious reappearance of Riddle Manor and its ruination, to include information regarding the bodies that had been pulled from the wreckage. The headless man with pasty skin and oddly long, spidery fingers. The man with mid-length, white-blond hair—

“Oh good, we got him that time,” Renato commented.

—and more than a few others, but they weren’t all that important. It was time to go.

Antonio met them in Milan and drove them to the Vongola Mansion. Iemitsu hastened into the entrance hall right about the time they entered it and escorted them to Nono, where they were waved toward chairs. Nono greeted them with a smile and an incline of the head.

Hisui bowed and stared back, then tapped the case he was holding. “A gift. May I open it?”

Nono nodded, his expression curious.

He set the case down, facing to the side, and popped the latch, then pulled the lid open. Inside were stacks of masks. “All of the Death Eater masks we were able to collect from the dead. More than a commensurate amount for your agents. Seventy of them.” Then he sat down.

Nono blinked. “You really don’t like the magicals.”

He shook his head. “They’re pathetic. Insofar as we can tell, Big Evil was also killed for real this time. In theory, you shouldn’t have problems again should you need to send people in to protect your interests.”

“Give me an overview, please,” Nono requested.

Renato’s chin lifted slightly, then he launched into a report of their activities while in England.

Nono seemed … impressed, both by their tactics and by the sheer number of people they had ended up killing while on foreign soil. He also seemed to agree that the magicals—in Britain, at least—were pathetic. “I would be pleased if you would join us for dinner.”
Renato accepted for them and Iemitsu was shortly escorting them to that same guest house. At the door Iemitsu said, “I’ll be back at seven,” then hastened off.

“Well,” Renato said, “at least now we should be able to visit England and France without having to worry too much about them. You good for heading back tomorrow?”

“Yes. We left plenty of food for Leon and Yori, but it won’t last much longer. I know, they can hunt for themselves, but that’s not fair of us if they’re forced to.”

Dinner was much like the previous time, with generally light conversation—nothing that pertained specifically to the Vongola, of course, as they were associates, not members of the Famiglia. Even so, Hisui thought he detected a certain softening of demeanor toward them, for how far they had gone on behalf of the Vongola. ‘Though if it had been anyone other than magicals, Nono might have wondered if we were too dangerous. Something to keep in mind.’
When Antonio showed up with a stranger in tow he was mildly confused. Hisui let them into the house and showed them to the living room. After inviting them to take seats he asked, “Would either of you like something to drink?”

“Coffee!” Renato called, appearing at the top of the stairs and starting down them.

He rolled his eyes and waited for an answer from their actual guests.

“Coffee is fine,” Antonio assured him with a faint smile.

He nodded and tossed a look at his lover before heading to the kitchen. A short time later he was back with a tray, actually carrying it, and slid it into place on the table. He cracked open his soda and sat back, hoping that Antonio would get around to explaining sooner rather than later.

Antonio did, after doctoring his cup and taking a sip. “Allow me to introduce Piero Zola, of the Cavallone Famiglia. Piero, this is Renato Sinclair and Hisui Nagao. I accompanied Piero because it’s just not the done thing to pop in unexpectedly and without someone to vouch for you.”

“So what’s going on?” Renato asked, reaching out to tap a cigarette out of the waiting pack and light up.

“The Cavallone Nono has a request,” he said. “It’s unorthodox, really, but as the Cavallone Famiglia is an ally of the Vongola, Nono has asked that you hear him out.”

‘All the way from Italy,’ he thought. ‘This ought to be good.’

Zola carefully reached into the inside breast pocket of his jacket and removed an envelope edged in orange, then held it out, seal up. It was mere wax, which made Hisui wonder how it was that so few people seemed to know how to do as the Vongola Nono did. Even he had figured it out after some experimentation. But, then, he was a little different than most flame-active people.

Renato took the envelope and broke the seal, removed the contents, and flipped open the folded paper and held it between them. Hisui’s first reaction was to squint, not sure he was seeing what he was seeing. ‘They want a tutor for their incipient Decimo? Since when are we teachers?’ They only actually needed one of them, but this was a long-term project, so the idea of one of them remaining in Japan was ludicrous, and they were willing to take them as a team.

Renato seemed to be similarly bemused if his muttered “Tutoring a Sky? What the fuck?” was anything to go by.

In the past they had done some tutoring of a sort, but not exactly, and not counting those times when they would spring ideas on each other to test out regarding their respective flames. Nono had occasionally asked one or both of them to assess new recruits. He wanted a mostly outside perspective on things, and it was not as though his guardians could always drop whatever else they were doing to see to it. He and Renato would take those people out on a few jobs and keep an eye on them, in some ways as a recruiter would, but also to assess their character, strengths, flaws, and give them some advice before reporting back to Nono.

They could, he thought, trade off on the duties. A hitman tutoring the heir to a famiglia? That just
seemed so … bizarre. Yori trotted in with Leon on his back and paused near Renato so that Leon could crawl onto the man’s knee, then jumped up on the sofa and onto the back so he could stare down at the letter.

Hisui glanced back to see his kneazel’s tail curl into a question mark. “This is unorthodox, yes,” he said, then lit up his own cigarette. “Why us?”

“Because neither of you is likely to go all soft on a Sky,” Zola replied. “You both have well-earned reputations for exacting standards in your work, a certain sense of morals, are well-versed in languages, and … the boy does not want to take over.”

He knew that the Cavallone Famiglia had financial problems, which also pointed toward Renato, even if facility with mathematics was not the same thing as facility with accounting, working the stock market, and other such activities. There was a decent age gap, such that the idea of Renato becoming ensnared by the young Sky was mostly laughable.

Renato would stand as a better tutor simply because he was a Sun, but that was not to say Hisui was incapable simply due to his flame types. If nothing else, he could provide plenty of attacks for the young boss to learn how to respond to, avert, or avoid. It might also help Hisui to come up with new methods of his own.

Hell, a fair part of his job of late was translating “acquired” documents for Don Timoteo. He knew so many languages that the odds of them running across something he was not already fluent in was negligible. And if they did, well, that was motivation to brush the dust off his curiosity and drive.

Renato exhaled gustily. “Would we still be able to take jobs while all this was going on? And how much leeway is involved? I mean, I can think of some great places to train the kid, but they won’t all be in Italy. What languages does the kid know? If he’s gonna become Decimo he’s going to need at least a handful. What kind of a mind does he have? Because stupid people irritate me.”

Zola blinked at the rapid fire of questions. “Yes, preferably only one of you at a time. A fair amount, travel included. Three at the moment. He attended one of the mafia-run schools. He’s a bright boy, but…”

Yori meowed questioningly, tail flicking out and curling.

“He’s a bit skittish.”

Renato snorted. “Most Skies are, at first. And then they start collecting guardians and they settle down.”

He thanked the gods he was not a Sky. The idea of having so many people around him so often made his spine quiver in distaste. Earths did not feel that same impetus to gather up people, though they did have a tendency to draw them in, like the gravitational forces they could control. ‘Well, that’s ninety percent conjecture,’ he thought, having never actually met another Earth, only heard of any—some famiglia connected as allies to the Vongola since the beginning.

“So he’s a fluffy little kitten with soft claws and needles for teeth right now,” he said.

“Essentially,” Zola said, though to his credit he did look uncomfortable agreeing.

Renato folded the letter up and placed it back into the envelope. “Excuse us for a moment, would you?”

He got up when his lover did and followed him into the kitchen. “Well,” he said softly. “I suppose I
don’t see why not, though leaving Japan for that long is a bit … daunting. I don’t expect Daisuke will be thrilled, but that’s a minor issue. It would mean we’d be in good with another famiglia—personally, not just by association alliance.”

“And there’s nothing stopping us from still taking jobs here through him, so long as it’s not both of us at once. We could always say yes to something like an initial testing period, and if that seemed to be going south, we’d have the option to walk away. And if it seems to be working out, getting the kid used to other cultures—not just their languages—would be an excellent idea.”

He nodded. “You’re better at negotiating than me. All that charm.”

Renato grinned. “Don’t be so modest. You were very charming the first time we ever met, especially once you relaxed a little.”

“You just had to be taller,” he said with false disgust. Those few times they had done a job together and it had required some manner of disguise, he was always the one cross-dressing and hanging off his lover’s arm like air-brained eye candy. “Get in there and start bargaining. I’ll figure out what we’ll need to take and how I’m going to explain this to Nana-chan. Oh, and are we even going to be anywhere near our house?”

Renato nodded and leaned in to kiss him, then returned to the living room.

“What?” Nana said in dismay.

He sighed. “It’s a wonderful opportunity.”

“I know, I just—” The corners of her mouth drooped down for a few seconds, then they snapped back more to a smile. “You’ll visit, of course.”

“Of course I’ll visit. Didn’t I visit when I was in Kyoto? It’s just a longer trip,” he said with a shrug. It had been a lot easier to spend time with his friend after he graduated and they moved to Namimori properly, though he rarely saw Iemitsu, or even little Tsuna. The kid was a bit frightened of him, with a tendency to squeak like a panicked mouse if he frowned or scowled, so he usually visited when the boy was at school.

“I know what this is about,” he teased. “You’re upset that me and my amazing cooking will be so far away.”

She giggled, which is what he had been going for, and said, “You’re so silly.”

They arrived with some extended pouches packed to the brims with various weapons and supplies. Several flies buzzed over almost immediately and engaged Renato in conversation, giving their report. “Right,” his lover said. “The kid’s upstairs with his father right now, being all weepy. Suppose I can’t blame him for that since Cavallone Nono is bedridden and not doing so well.”

“Let’s find a place to wait, then,” he said, “preferably without being visible. If he’s upset and doesn’t want to be the boss, he’ll probably do a runner of some kind in an excess of angst.”

Renato nodded and pointed. The house itself was the sort where the ground floor was actually about seven feet up, with twin, curving stairs leading up to the entrance, allowing for an arch through the center leading into a semi-sheltered courtyard. Hisui took his lover’s hand and disillusioned them,
and let himself be pulled along as Renato started moving.

The courtyard was a mixture of lawn and dirt—probably used at times for practice—with Greco-Roman columns scattered about, lacking whatever they might once have supported. One was severely damaged, only half the height of the others and cracked off at an angle. They settled in to lean against a wall and wait.

Eventually a blond young man came out of the house at a fast clip and headed for the stairs. He made it down and started across the courtyard, but tripped, doing a face-plant and grunting in pain. After a moment he rolled over and stared up at the sky. Some of the resulting dirt on his face was much darker, showing that he had been crying, though the hitching of his chest also pointed to that.

They gave him a little time to calm down, then Renato whispered, “All right. Show time.”

He stripped away the disillusionment and walked with his lover over to where the boy was; the kid didn’t even notice them until Renato’s shadow fell across his face, at which point the boy jerked in surprise and tilted his head back. “Who—?”

“Chaos. We’re your new home tutors,” Renato informed him. “We’re going to make your life really exciting.”

“So,” he said. “Let’s get this over with. Tell us all about how you don’t want to take over leadership of the Cavallone Famiglia. The whys, the wherefores, the whining, the complaining… Let it all out.”

Dino aimed wide doe eyes at him, then the floodgates opened, which to Hisui’s mind was odd simply because neither of them normally presented sympathetic faces. He had taken Renato’s pronouncement and made a horrid, high-pitched sound of alarm, but managed to introduce himself, getting their names in return.

Afterward he had hauled himself up, though not without making it seem as though it was comparable to Atlas’s burden of holding up the sky, and led them inside, where they were joined by a man by the name of Romario. Romario greeted them almost enthusiastically and hastened off to ensure that their suite was ready, and Dino took them into a sitting room.

When Dino finally wound down he looked drained, yet relieved.

‘Has no one ever just listened to the kid?’ he wondered. “Do you feel better?”

Dino nodded.

“None of that changes anything, you realize,” he pointed out.

Dino looked as though he might start crying again and hunched his shoulders defensively.

“One of the realities of life,” Renato said, “is that if you’re raised in the mafia, walking away is next to impossible—unless you really do like the idea of your getaway location being six feet under. You have serious financial problems. Have you stopped to consider that? We don’t come cheap, so your father is taking a calculated risk here by hiring us. He’s balancing the cost against what you’ll become. How are you going to respond to that?”

“We know you’re not unintelligent,” he said. “You probably have the brains and the foresight to turn this situation around. But that’s not the whole picture. You have a lot of people looking to you, even if they’re your father’s men right now and give their primary loyalty to him. So we have a number of
things to focus on. Getting you up to speed on the financial side and how to address that issue; gaining trust and respect from the men; going over your education and seeing where there are holes or what you need to devote more time to; your physical condition; your fighting ability; your guardians; and your command of your Dying Will.”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought. ‘The kid’s face. There’s a lot to be said for choosing your path and having it lead into the mafia over being shoved into it, but the kid had to have known where his life was headed.’

Romario bustled in and said, “Gentlemen, please allow me to show you your suite. I trust that everything will please you, but if not, do tell me and I will ensure any issues are corrected.”

He got up, as did Renato and Dino, and followed, taking a moment to plant a tracker on the kid. Depending on how things went he might try to run for real, and they could not allow that. The suite they were shown to had a generously-sized reception room with a comfortable seating area and even a dining table, and two bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. He idly wondered how long it would take for Dino to intuit that his tutors were together, and how he would react to that knowledge. Dino wandered off after seeing which set of rooms they would be in, looking tragic and claiming he needed to clean up, so they turned to Romario.

“We’d like the reports on his schooling,” Renato said, “and a map of the grounds.” He paused, eyeing Romario speculatively. “Sun, eh? Maybe some aspects of Rain?”

Romario nodded. “I will get those for you by this evening at the latest. And yes, I am primarily a Sun.”

“Not the kid’s guardian?” Renato ventured.

Romario shrugged. “There’s something there, but… The young master has been so resistant to following in his father’s footsteps…”

Renato nodded. “So he’s subconsciously blocking off any harmonization, with the added complication of him seeing you as something of an authority figure. And that’s assuming you even want to be his guardian or feel any pull toward him.”

“I’m fine with the position,” Romario replied, “if it works out that way. He’s a good kid.”

“How far are you willing to go?” he asked. “Because he’d need to see you right there beside him, out there doing all the physical aspects of training, showing that you’re willing to go the distance.”

Romario nodded again. “Like I said, he’s a good kid. I’ll do what it takes.”

Renato scratched his jaw contemplatively, then said, “Why don’t you bring that information along with dinner. We can eat in here and talk, plan.”

“I will do so. If you’ll excuse me?”

Renato nodded, and Romario took his leave. The moment the door was shut Hisui was sweeping each room for bugs or cameras. Surprisingly, there were none. He was not quite sure how to feel about that. Were they that desperate? Or just that confident, seeing as how they came with the personal recommendation of the Vongola Nono? Even so, he tossed out a spell to muffle anything they said. “No bugs,” he informed his lover, “but I intend to set up some warding, to ensure it stays that way. In this case, however…”

“Misdirection?”
He nodded. “If they do manage to sneak something in, I’d rather they heard innocuous conversation over utter silence. Something I can turn on and off depending on whether we have someone else in here who would notice if they were to go over any recordings.”

“All right. I’ll start putting the ‘safe’ things away while you do that,” Renato said, then chose a bedroom for them to use. They had determined, finally, that by coating his hands in flames Renato could use an extended pouch the same way a magical could, which vastly simplified things.

Hisui pulled Yori out of his pocket and set him down, then pulled a temporary ward set from one of his pouches and got to work, starting in the reception room.

Romario showed up at seven with a large cart filled with food and pushed it over to the table. He unloaded everything, poured wine, and waited until they had seated themselves to also sit down. A folder of material was set in the center of the table, as well, which Renato took and began to flip through.

Hisui cast a few spells under the table to ensure nothing was amiss, then picked up his cutlery and began to eat, which clued his lover in to it being safe. Renato set the folder to one side and also began to eat. Conversation consisted of small talk during the meal, getting a feel for Romario as a person, and afterward, once dessert was enjoyed, they all moved to the seating arrangement over near the fireplace.

Renato busied himself with the folder again, handing pages to Hisui as he finished reading each one, then reassembled it a short time later. “So, all right. The kid’s not bad, but there are definitely areas which could be improved. But, given the famiglia’s position, I think we’re going to have to press pretty damn hard on the financial aspects.”

Romario looked uncomfortable at the reminder of their overall situation, but nodded. “Nono has instructed me to cooperate as much as possible without giving away anything … private.”

He eyed the man for a moment. “What’s the overview on the financial situation, then? What’s the money maker?”

Romario exhaled noisily. “Protection racketeering primarily. The usual. People pay us for protection against rivals, thieves, even the police. ”

His brow furrowed in confusion. That was fairly standard and not a bad way to have the approval of the people in one’s territory, so why were they losing money?

“Unfortunately, there’s been a lot of encroachment since Nono got ill, and we’ve been having trouble keeping on top of it.”

“Oh,” Renato said quietly. “I can work with that. If nothing else, I can meet with whoever is in charge of priorities and assignments right now, and the financial side in general. We can’t do actual jobs of that nature unless Cavallone Nono wants to fork over the usual pay, and I don’t think that’s going to happen, not with what we’re already getting paid. So, let’s talk about the kid.”

They spent the next three hours going over a plan of action, then Romario loaded up the cart again and hastened off with a promise of breakfast being delivered.

The next morning Renato went off to speak with certain people and Hisui dragged Dino off to start in on physical training. He focused on stamina first and ran the kid into the ground, only letting him slow down to a walk so that he could better gulp down lukewarm water or a sports drink without tripping over his own feet and ending up sprawled on the ground. He did that often enough as it was;
Hisui couldn’t remember the last time he had encountered someone so clumsy. When it got close to noon he sent the boy off to clean up after refreshing the tracking spell, and met his lover for lunch in their suite.

“The kid’s a mess,” he said, slicing into his ossobuco and taking a bite.

“Well, mafia-run does not mean those types of schools are actually teaching the kids to be mafiosi,” Renato replied.

“I assume you made a decent start on getting certain things ironed out.”

“Oh yes, you better believe it. Gotta have something for the kid to actually inherit, after all. I’ll get it straightened out. Besides, they have to be doing reasonably well if we expect to be able to haul the kid off to points unknown.”

“You thinking of that mountain area we found? The one with all the exciting wildlife?”

Renato grinned and nodded. “It’s close enough to one of the houses and we have room.”

“Right. The kid is so clumsy it’s like watching a physical comedy routine in action,” he said with a sigh. “Please, when you see it, try not to laugh in his face.”

“For you to say that means you’ve been sorely tempted.”

“Yes.” He rolled his eyes. After a deep sip of wine he added, “Once you don’t need Romario I’ll add him to the mix, so that the kid can see his man doing everything he does, show his commitment and support.”

“Yeah. Probably within the next couple of days, a week tops,” Renato replied. “Once these guys stop looking to him first before doing what I say. I’m glad they’re so loyal and all, but it can get somewhat annoying when I’m trying my best to get them back into business as quickly as possible.”

“And not intimidate them to the point where they wet themselves?” he asked wryly.

After lunch he sat Dino down and started quizzing him on the other languages he knew, basically by speaking to him conversationally, but varying which language by sentence, to see how fast the kid could switch mental gears. Dino was flustered in no time flat, but Hisui did not let up. He was patient enough when it came to waiting for a response, but he nailed the kid with a senbon every time Dino answered in Italian.

Finally coming to the conclusion that Dino was good at French, moderate at English, and barely conversant with Japanese, he started speaking entirely in English for the rest of the afternoon. Once he felt the kid was a lot more comfortable with it he would switch to Japanese. After that he would spend the afternoons dealing with the written forms, and then perhaps teach him additional languages. Familiarity with the cultures and customs would come later. Romario could join in when he was available, just like he would be joining in for the physical training.

A week later he was surprised to see that Dino’s clumsiness decreased drastically once Romario had been included in things. ‘What the hell?’ he thought. ‘What’s going on here?’ Romario took everything in stride, did everything that was asked of him, with no complaints or even a vague hint of crossness. Maybe it was having some effect on the kid? Maybe Dino respected him that much? It had to be his childish desire to walk—run—away from the mafia that had prevented harmonization. Given a little more time he could easily see the bond snapping into place, before the kid would even realize what was going on.
Dino looked around somewhat in awe. They had flown into Osaka and traveled the remainder of the way by car. Dino and Romario in the car with them, and the remainder of the men in a second car following them. They could have taken a limousine, but that would have attracted the wrong kind of attention in a place like Namimori.

Yori pranced off with Leon on his back, happy to be home, and Renato showed the men to rooms so they could unload. At that, it would only be a temporary base. Most of the training they had in mind would take place at a location they called the Mountain of Death, about a half hour away from Namimori.

Dinner that night was full Japanese, right down to the hashi. It was time for Dino and his men to immerse themselves a bit now that they had the language down. Dino, of course, made a complete mess of things, but Hisui just sighed slightly and made the barest roll of his eyes. They had waited until the kid was eighteen to take him out of the country, so he was an adult, even if he was not considered one by Japanese standards.

He had difficulty relating to Dino at times what with the disparity of their backgrounds. He had been more mature at fourteen than Dino was at eighteen, but the kid was getting steadily better, especially after he had harmonized with Romario and started picking up other guardians. It was something of a pain dealing with Michael (a Storm) and Bono (a Lightning) in the same room together, but the two were mature enough to make it work for the sake of their Sky. Ivan was a Rain, so he was never a problem.

After dinner Renato reminded them not to wander. Namimori was a peaceful little town for the most part, so seeing a bunch of foreign men roaming around in high-class suits was going to make people talk. He did not want word getting back to Nana-chan. He would visit her, of course, but the other stuff should be kept out of her purview. Tourists did not go to Namimori as a rule.

After Dino went to bed they had a little conference with the guardians. “You guys follow in the other car, but at a distance,” Renato said. “We’ll leave a trail for you to follow at the mountain. It’s important to see how he handles things on his own at first.”

Romario nodded. “I understand.” He glanced at his fellow guardians, who also nodded.

The next day they bundled Dino into a car and drove away, not telling him where they were going. Even after a year of being put through the wringer the kid still balked at times, and he was slowly gaining a look of suspicion as they left the car behind and started walking into the forest surrounding the base of the mountain. Hisui left senbon sticking out of trees along the way to guide the others, and they knew to keep back out of sight once they caught up.

They finally ran into something interesting: a bear. Dino squeaked like a newborn kitten and shakily uncoiled his whip, then started flailing around with it in a parody of fighting, trying to drive the creature away.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Kami-sama,” he muttered. “Look at that. The damn bear is confused. I didn’t think a bear could make that expression.”

Renato sighed along with him, shaking his head. “Tch. Blasted kid. He’s useless if he doesn’t have one of his men nearby.”

The bear kept tilting its head, trying to figure out what the strange beast was, and let out a somewhat tentative roar. Dino squeaked again and redoubled his efforts, managing to coil the whip around his
own legs and yank himself off balance. He hit the ground face-first. The bear shuffled back a little and tilted its head again.

He could feel the guardians approaching and brought a hand back to remind them to stay out of sight; when he felt them stop he returned his full attention back to the pathetic “fight” going on in front of them. Dino had managed to untangle himself and get back up. ‘Say what you will about his ineptitude,’ he thought, ‘but for all the fear he wears like a cloak, he’s still got plenty of guts. That or he’s worried Renato will shoot him again.’

Leon had displayed a very remarkable talent. Eating emotions and shape-shifting was not the limit of his bizarre-ness. Renato had had some loose bullets on the table while he was packing a magazine and Leon had lashed out with his tongue and swallowed one, causing Renato to nearly flip out with worry. The chameleon had refused to cough it back up until several days later, at which point it came out glowing. They’d had no idea what to do with it.

It was not until Renato had taken a job that they had any idea what the glow meant. He had come back home with a look of bemusement on his face and said, after a lingering kiss of greeting, “That bullet.”

“Yes?”

“It ignited Dying Will Flames in my target.”

“Eh?”

Renato had led him over to the sofa and sat down, then lit up and took a long drag. After he exhaled he had said, “Yeah. I shot the guy in the head because I was feeling feisty. A few seconds after he went down I saw Dying Will Flames erupt from his forehead. The weirdest part was that his clothes disintegrated, all but his boxers. He jumped back up, shouted something about how he was going to propose with his Dying Will, and raced off. I was so surprised I almost let him get away. I killed him, of course, but…”

“Huh.”

“I’m really confused, tesoro.”

“That makes two of us.”

The next time they had visited the Vongola, Renato had asked if they had any prisoners they were planning to kill. Nono had said yes, and Renato asked if he could perform a little experiment before they were dealt with. Nono, having become intrigued at that point, agreed, so long as he and his guardians could watch. Renato had an entire magazine of those glowing bullets by that point and shot the prisoners one by one, and each of them had the same reaction.

“Regret,” Nono had murmured. “They feel regret. That’s the only reason they survived a shot to the head that would otherwise have killed them.”

He and Renato had shared a look.

Nono had been insanely curious at that point as to where the bullets had come from, but they weren’t talking. Renato did agree, however, that he might be persuaded to use those bullets for a good cause, at some point down the road. Dino had been the first unlucky person to suffer a shot to the head in the name of training and it had worked beautifully, though he had first been shot in the legs, because that wouldn’t be fatal. It’d had the effect of allowing Dino to be able to jump around as if he was on the moon, or as if Hisui had altered his personal gravity. Even so, it was far better for the kid to train
without that crutch, so that when he was able to realize his flames on his own, he would be that much stronger.

The bear had progressed far enough in its confusion to sit back and quite nearly paw at its head, so Hisui encouraged it to go away with a careful application of his power. Dino calmed down and was able to re-coil his whip and hang it off his belt, though when he looked over at them a fierce blush appeared and he could not quite meet their eyes. “Not so good.”

He huffed quietly. “Not so good,” he repeated.

Renato surged forward and urged their student on, and he waved a hand back at the others to follow. They eventually ended up at a lovely area with a cliff and waterfall and a clearing they could eat in. He signaled again for the guardians to stop, just inside the tree line, as Renato gazed up at the cliff face.

“Dino!”

“Y-yes?”

“You are going to climb this cliff like a professional.”

Dino gawked at Renato in disbelief.

Renato chuckled; it was low and menacing, full of promises. “Really? You dare look at me like that, after so long, as if I might be joking?”

Dino blushed again and shrank back a little, then did his best to straighten up. A look at the cliff saw him shaking slightly.

“Tch.” Renato smirked. “There’s a nice pool right there for you to fall into should you miss your grip or footing. So, get started, young one.” He pulled out his gun and aimed.

Dino shrieked and stumbled off toward the cliff, and started climbing. No matter how many times he had been shot with one of those Dying Will Bullets, he was convinced the next time would be his death. He made it several meters up before he lost his grip and tumbled down into the pool, then surfaced, sputtering.

Renato trained his gun on the kid and smiled. “Nice try. Let’s do better this time, hm?”

Dino quaked and leaped out of the pool, face-planted, got back up, and started climbing again.

Hisui faded back into the trees and went to stand by Romario. “Your boss is just…”

“I know. Maybe with time we can at least extend his range.”

“We can hope. Though the idea of a boss on his own, especially a Sky, is somewhat ludicrous.”

It took a week of attempts for Dino to climb the cliff, and another week after that before he could climb it on the first try. Hisui was always ready to help cushion the fall, though he did not prevent them. Doing so would be babying the kid, and that was not part of the job. The week following that they finally allowed his men to join them visibly. They would all climb the cliff, then do some jogging on a path at the top, and then practice with their weapons.

His ability to materialize objects and move them around was invaluable in giving the men targets to aim for, and in learning how to deal with hitting something that did not shatter like the glass it was. It
did wonders for their aim, if nothing else, though he had to be careful when any of them were using guns. Dino’s facility with his whip improved steadily, and his stamina skyrocketed.

By the time six months had passed Dino was able to call on his Sky Flames without being shot. Then they had even more fun.

China was next, and they spent six months there, and then it was back to Italy for a time. Dino managed to harmonize with Brutus (a Cloud) and Brizio (a Mist) with barely any effort, which meant they would be sticking around for some time. New bonds were touchy, and adding two new guardians into the mix after more than a year of the others working together was a volatile situation, especially given the natures of the two new men.

On the other hand, they all got training in resisting Mist-driven illusions, though Hisui was at an advantage due to Occlumency and his unique mind. Brizio’s initial efforts all had a strangely translucent quality to them, but with some time and effort he was able to block them out entirely. Renato was also able to do so, but they could both allow for at least a faint trace to affect them, just enough so that they could tell what Brizio was attempting to do.

“I think it’s time, since we’re stuck here for a while, for us to push the kid into starting up his own venture,” Renato said during breakfast.

“The foundation you told me about?”

Renato nodded.

“That will mean all of them learning the ropes of a new business. Do you mind if I visit Nana for a week, then?”

“Hm? No, go ahead. We won’t be going anywhere here for a while.”

By the time he returned his lover had sketched out the idea for Dino and his guardians, and the kid was quite taken with the idea. The Cavallone Foundation would add a layer of respectability to the famiglia, be doing actual good works within their territory (in addition to the protection they provided for a fee), and help launder money.

All those “anonymous” donations, used for the welfare of the community and to pay the salaries of those working there, who just happened to mostly be part of the famiglia. It would be assisting local hospitals, orphanages, soup kitchens, elder care facilities—though they would start out small and work their way up to more ambitious endeavors. It would also result in a lot of people who benefited from those services providing information, like an intelligence network. Even if some of the information that came in was fallacious, all of it would be carefully vetted before being acted on.

Hisui went back to running Dino and his men ragged during the mornings, for the sake of stamina and their abilities. Renato had them all in the afternoons. On the weekends the two of them would go to the house in Rozzano to be away from it all.

The Cavallone Nono was still hanging on, possibly propped up by the evidence that his son was settling into the position, and happily enough discussed issues with Dino. Nono’s attitude trickled down through his guardians and to the other men in the famiglia, and they were all dividing their loyalty between Nono and Decimo.

The Cavallone Foundation was up and running well under the guidance of the financial sorts in the famiglia, so he and Renato hauled Dino and his guardians off to France for a while, then England, but they hastened back to Italy when a call came in that Nono was failing fast. He held on long
enough to see his son one last time.

The year following the funeral was spent getting everything sorted out, and propping up Dino when he would break down. For some reason he preferred Hisui for those moments. He decided it was because he was usually so non-judgmental, and because he was not one of the men looking up to the kid. Realistically, Dino should have been allowing his guardians to carry that burden, but the relationship between the men continued to deepen, and he and Renato would not be there forever.

Nono’s guardians stayed on in a semi-retired advisory capacity, often involving themselves in the foundation, acting as oversight for the people actually handling its operation, or as oversight for those involved in handling the protection of their territory.

In April of 2014 a text came in from Antonio, asking them to please come to the Vongola base.

“What’s going on?” Dino asked.

He shrugged. “We won’t know until we answer the summons.”

“Don’t worry, kid,” Renato said. “We’ll let you know, if we can pass on anything at all.”

The drive was pleasant and they arrived at the manor three hours later, to be met by Antonio at the doors, who accompanied them inside and handed them over to Brabanters and Ganauche. ‘It’s a little odd not seeing Iemitsu here,’ he thought, ‘but he has other duties.’

The room they were led to was more of a study, with a cozy grouping of seats near a fireplace and a desk off to one side. Ganauche waved them into seats, and Hisui bowed first, as always.

“I am … getting on in years,” Nono said after greeting them. “It is time to see to the next generation.”

And Don Timoteo’s sons were all either dead or on ice (in the case of Xanxus). None of them had had children, or if they had, none were Skies. Which left—?

“The only qualifying bloodline member remaining will need to be trained, and I am requesting that the two of you handle this for me. I have heard more than a few reports from the Cavallone Nono before his death about the great strides you two made in preparing the young Decimo. You have performed admirably, and have strengthened that famiglia and our alliance at the same time.”

Renato’s chin started to jut out.

“You are curious as to who this person is,” Nono said, chuckling slightly. “You know him already, though not, perhaps, very well. When the Vongola Primo stepped down he moved to Japan and lived out the remainder of his life there under a new name. The most recent two of that line are Sawada Iemitsu and Sawada Tsunayoshi.”

His brow shot up in surprise. They were bloodline? Iemitsu was the boss of CEDEF, the Consulenza Esterna Della Famiglia, which meant he was out of the running. So, little Tsuna? The squeak toy? The one Nana kept saying in her letters was lazy and unmotivated and kept skipping out on school? That Tsuna? “Kami-sama,” he muttered.

“I realize that Tsuna is young, very young, but I believe you can temper your methods against that. Not baby him, but…”

“I’m sure we can come up with a plan of action,” Renato said confidently. “Dino is getting on well at this point, so it’s not as though we need to stick around, and he needs to learn to manage without his tutors hovering in the background. It probably doesn’t hurt that Nana knows both of us.”
“And trusts you,” Nono said. “Tsuna would be, I believe, the kind of successor who would continue to guide the Vongola in the less base aspects of the business.”

“I wish to clarify,” he said, and when Nono nodded, he continued, “If he is the only eligible Sky, then we will have an idea of just how firm we may need to be—or how devious.”

“He is it,” Nono confirmed, “though I had hoped years ago that it would not come to this. I had the child’s flames sealed with the expectation that one of my sons would take over for me and that little Tsuna could live a normal life. Unfortunately, as you know, they have preceded me to the silence of the grave.”

Though he did not show it he felt a bit horrified at that admission. If it was anything like a magical it was possible that the sealing of one’s flames would leave a person feeling … empty, cold, and lacking. He had never witnessed Tsuna manifesting Sky Flames, but he was not often around the child. Perhaps Nono had done it to ensure the child never manifested them? Because if he had there would have been no choice, just as there was apparently no choice now.

Renato jutted his chin out again and said, “You believe that if we shoot him, they’ll be freed.”

“Yes. And prove to the boy that he has them at all,” Nono replied. “He will have to be led to understand that even were they left sealed, we have enemies who would think nothing of assassinating him once they realize where the succession must go. I could wish that other children had been born, earlier on even, but I must work with what I have available to me.”

The mafia world would devolve into anarchy if the Vongola Famiglia suddenly fell apart. They had a huge job on their hands. Deciding not to take it was not an option, not with Nana’s son involved. ‘In the end,’ he thought, ‘it’s just as well the kid is scared of me.’

“How often do you want reports? And would we be funneling them through Antonio or reporting more directly?” Renato asked.

“Too me. Antonio is not equipped to deal with something of this nature, though he still may offer you the odd job, assuming it would not interfere with the main task. However, that brings up a point. I wish for little Tsuna to become the best he can; therefore, while I can appreciate the both of you acting in defense of your own lives, the boy must be pushed to defend himself and what guardians he gathers. To this end, aside from a special phone number I will provide, I will employ the use of messenger birds when necessary.”

He nodded to himself. One of the things he had done as a “job” had been to purchase birds in the magical “world”, ones they could breed, a book explaining how to train them, and provide “collars” for those same birds. The runes engraved into them would help keep the birds from being noticed and protect anything they were carrying from the elements, and could be charged with flames. If they were going to settle in Namimori again he might as well get a few for their house, to facilitate certain aspects of the job.

“Of course,” Nono added, “if it comes down to it, and the boy’s life is in a danger you honestly believe he cannot avert, save him, and then train him that much harder. I would prefer that such would never be necessary, but it will depend a great deal on who comes after him once word begins to filter out, because it always does.”

Renato nodded (though Hisui was thinking of ways to give the kid a breather in that situation, to be able to regroup and try again, sort of like helping to cushion Dino’s falls) and asked, “VPN video conferencing?”
Nono steepled his hands in front of him, elbows supported by the arms of his chair, and considered. “I’ve no doubt that both of you could remember a lengthy password, so yes, though only in dire situations. Otherwise the more usual means. I fully expect that you two can vet any potential guardians for the boy. They will all probably be similarly young.”

“How soon would you like us to begin?” Hisui asked.

“Soon,” Nono said unhelpfully. “I realize you must tie up any loose ends with the Cavallone Decimo, but if you would return here prior to your departure for Japan, we will provide communications equipment and the password, along with the private number I will be setting aside.”

Shortly thereafter they were back in the car and driving to Cavallone Manor. “Dino will not be pleased.”

Renato took a hand off the wheel long enough to flip it negligently. “I stand by what I said earlier. The boy has to let go of us and fly on his own. Or gallop, as the case may be.”

He scowled. “It was an observation, not a complaint. I happen to agree with you that Dino needs to stand on his own, with the support of his guardians. He’s certainly been trained to within an inch of his life. Even so, you’d think he’d have outgrown that clumsiness by now. What do you think of enlisting that boy, Gokudera, as a potential guardian?”

“Shamal’s erstwhile apprentice?” Renato hummed thoughtfully. “The boy is desperate to be part of a famiglia and he’s the right age. He’s a Storm, so he’ll be volatile. That’d require some fancy footwork to get him to cooperate in the beginning.”

“So misdirect him. And if he doesn’t work out, we’ll figure out how to handle it then. No reason the kid can’t make a career as a freelancer if it comes to that.”

Renato hummed again. “I can always entice him there by asking him to evaluate the potential Decimo. That would make him feel important. He’s also part Japanese and I know he knows the language. All we’d have to do is ensure that the kitten wins whatever test is presented and Gokudera should fall right in. The two hardest to deal with are Storm and Cloud, anyway.”

“Mist isn’t always easy,” he pointed out, “and neither is Lightning.”

“I know,” Renato said, and sighed. “Hell, they’re all a pain in the ass at that age. I was a pain in the ass at that age. Hopefully we can find a good set in Namimori, because importing a bunch of kids would be next to impossible.”

“I wasn’t a pain in the ass at that age,” he said flatly.

His lover snorted in amusement. “Maybe not, tesoro, but you do share some similarities with a classic Cloud temperament. The biggest issue with Gokudera is that he doesn’t exactly have a lot of money at hand. Sure, his daddy is rich, but that doesn’t mean the kid will have any to take with him.”

“…How do you feel about an investment property?”

“Not a bad idea,” Renato said admiringly. “We could push one through and ensure the kid gets a place there, but not make it too easy on him. If he asks for help that’s one thing, but I’m willing to bet he’d be too proud. He’s also a smart kid, and I don’t doubt he’d want to get away from Bianchi.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t we all? She really needs to find someone else to obsess over. She’s lucky I haven’t permanently maimed her yet.”
Renato refrained from commenting, and instead said, “Soon as we get back to Dino’s I’ll do some checking, start making calls. You’re better at dealing with the kid when he’s sobbing on our boots, so…”

“Yes, I’ll handle that. We can always pay for Gokudera’s flight over as part of the evaluation deal. Guardianship, though… We’ll just have to cheat that. One of us can sneak the information into the system.”

“For one of us, or one of our aliases?”

“Good question. Dr Borin, I think. After all, Shamal did say the kid was fantastic at mathematics.”

“That’s fine. What about—eh, how about we do the lease agreement for the kid with me as a—well, I guess it would depend on who was actually on-site. Then again, the kid probably won’t know much of anything about how things work, so if we just give him a key and lay out the rules and the monthly rent due…”

“Odds are we’re going to have to ‘encourage’ someone to move out. We’ll figure it out once we have the place. We’ll just have to remember to make sneak inspections of the—actually, let’s see if Dino has anyone who wants to retire and would be willing to take on the role of manager. That’d save us a lot of trouble right there. And we are going to a lot of trouble for one volatile teenager. Kami-sama.”

“Hopefully it’ll be worth it in the end.”

When they arrived at the house Renato went straight to their suite and started working on the property issue, so Hisui tracked down Dino to break the news. Predictably, Dino squeaked like a damn kitten and aimed a set of watery doe eyes at him. “What!? You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” he said flatly.

Dino sat down next to him and leaned against him. “I guess it had to end sometime. Though I guess I won’t miss the part where you two scare me to death on a regular basis.”

He snorted. “Sure. Listen, kid. I have two things to talk about. First, think about it like this. You’ll get to meet our new student at some point, and you can look at him, and think back, and realize just how very far you’ve come.”

“That’s true,” Dino said, sitting up properly. “Is he as bad as I was?”

‘Worse, if what Nana has to say is true.’ “Comparable, at least. So feel free to feel superior when you do meet him. Second, I have to ask if you’ve got anyone who’s looking to retire, someone good with management.”

“Eh?”

“We need someone to manage a building we’re planning to purchase in the next couple of weeks, someone good with figures, and maintenance if possible. Flame-active or not is fine, but they obviously must be in good standing and willing to move to Japan.”

“Ah… Let’s go through the files, then,” Dino promptly suggested. Several hours later they had a list compiled and planned to speak with those men the next day. Dino ordered dinner for three in the tutors’ suite and they headed that way, finding Renato busy on his laptop and with a phone at his ear.

He eyed his lover before taking a seat at the dining table and lighting a cigarette, pulling a spare
ashtray over. “If he’s not off the phone by the time dinner arrives, I’ll fling something at him.”

Dino laughed quietly as Renato glanced over with a frown, but kept right on talking into the phone. Ten minutes and a cigarette later Renato was off the phone and a knock came at the door. Hisui got up to answer it and allow the food to be rolled in, then went to sit back down.

“I have a few leads,” Renato said as he picked up his utensils. “It’s going to require that we go over there, though. There’s one place in particular where the owner is looking to retire and doesn’t have any family to pass it on to. Smallish place, only ten units, several of them are open, plus the manager’s apartment.”

He nodded. “We have files on people to talk to about managing the place for us. We can go over those tomorrow, interview them, and see if any of them will suit. But the sooner we get over there for a visit and get a building squared away…”

“You didn’t say why, though,” Dino pointed out.

“We have a potential guardian in mind for the kitten,” Renato said, “but he’s only thirteen at the moment and it’s not like he’s got a huge bank account. We need a place for him to live, and since he’s a Storm…”

Dino started laughing. “I see. You have to cater to his temperament. So you buy a building, point him at the place, and fix his rent. And you’d have someone you could trust managing the place and to keep an unobtrusive eye on him.”

“Very good,” he praised lightly.

“And if he doesn’t click?”

“Then we figure out what he wants to do and give him a few nudges, introduce him to some people,” Renato said. “Poor kid could use a hand, but we’re not about to just hand him salvation on a silver platter.”

“Who is it?”

He and Renato exchanged a look, then he said, “Gokudera.”

Dino’s eyes went wide. “No.”

He arched a brow.

“You do realize Bianchi will probably figure out where he’s gone to and follow.” Dino paused, then smiled. “Of course, that means she’ll leave me alone.”

“Tch. She would anyway,” Renato said. “The moment she finds out we’re no longer here, she won’t care about trying to poison you. Of course, if we find out you were the one to tell her where to look…” His expression went dark.

Dino laughed nervously and shook his head. “Not a chance. You might ‘forget’ and shoot me with a normal bullet, or make me into a pincushion of pain.”

“It’s so delightful when a student respects his teachers, don’t you agree, tesoro?” Renato said cheerfully.

The next day they talked to each of the men on their list and decided on one of them, a Giovani
Carolla. He was told to get his affairs in order in preparation for a move and sent off. Renato got on the phone again to arrange for transport and they were on a plane the next day to Osaka. They stayed in a hotel and slept like the dead, then Hisui apparated them home so they could meet with the estate agent and start the process of purchasing the property.

Once it was theirs tickets were sent to Carolla for his flight. Renato would go pick him up at the airport. Hisui had some birds to go select and purchase, not to mention supplies to pick up, a building to effect repairs to, and an apartment to ward. No silver platters, but he would ensure the boy would be safe in his own home, even if Gokudera would never realize the protections he would enjoy.

The apartment in question was not very large, but it didn’t need to be. After he embedded the warding materials and charged everything up, he splashed magic around liberally in order to clean the place, effect repairs, spruce it up, and generally make it nice, if bland. He did the same for the other open apartment. Any of them which opened up he would “fix”, but that would happen in its own time. The owner had already packed up his life and moved, so Hisui moved on to that apartment and gave it the same treatment. Both the manager’s apartment and the one intended for Gokudera were furnished, as well, with simple but study items.

By the time Renato returned with Carolla the man was able to move into his new home without any fuss. They stayed long enough to ensure the current tenants had met Carolla, then returned to Italy to speak with Gokudera.

“You want me to do what?” the kid said, eyeing them with marked distrust.

“And here we thought you’d be interested in being a guardian for a Sky,” Renato said. “But if not, we have other people we can talk to…” He made as if get up.

“No!” Gokudera said quickly. “I never said I didn’t want to. I want—I want clarification. You’re talking about lies.”

Renato’s smile was sharp and showed too many teeth. “Yes, lies. As I said, you’ll have a chance to evaluate the Sky. And then you can confront him. Throwing him off balance first only makes sense.”

“This is a rare opportunity,” he stressed. “The odds of finding an unattached Sky… Most dream of that sort of thing.”

Gokudera looked torn, longing and suspicion warring for control of his expression. “I—I can’t really afford to—”

“Not a problem,” Renato interrupted smoothly. “We are asking you to do us a favor, after all. So, as part of the payment for this evaluation, the plane ticket is included, along with one month’s rent on an apartment. You decide you want to stick around and I’m sure you can find a part-time job of some kind to keep the place.”

“And if it doesn’t work out?” the kid asked warily.

“Then we set you up with a contact,” he said, “which is more than most people get when they start in the business.”

Gokudera actually looked interested in that. “How did you start?”

“I was scouted,” he replied. “Someone took note of my abilities and recruited me. Once I proved I was worth the effort I was taken on by a famiglia as an associated freelancer. I was fourteen.”

Gokudera’s eyes widened slightly. “You didn’t join.”
He shook his head. “Didn’t want to. But I did want to make my own way, and I’ve been doing this for twenty years. What do you say? You willing to take a chance? You stand to gain the Sky, and you know what that means.”

Gokudera frowned, his gaze darting off to the side. He started twisting one of the rings he was wearing and licked his lips. “I can apologize to him after, right?” he muttered.

Hisui played with Renato’s fingers under the table while they waited. The offer was on the table and it was never wise to push a Storm if there was no respect built up.

“I’ll do it!”

“Got a passport, kid?” Renato asked.

“I—no.” Gokudera deflated.

“Also not a problem. We’ll get you set up. The only thing you’ll need to bring is yourself and your personal belongings. Forget about the weapons, kid. Once we get set up over there we’ll bring you over and you can get settled in, and then start your evaluation. And when you’re ready we’ll get you enrolled.”

“No weapons?” The kid looked horrified.

He rolled his eyes slightly. “You make up a list. We know you favor dynamite, but are you getting it already made? Do you make it yourself? Make up a list, kid. It’ll be waiting for you.”

Gokudera nodded. “Yeah. I will.”
“You want to do what?” she asked.

“I have been paying attention to all the things you say in your letters, you know,” he said with a faint hint of exasperation. “It’s time someone lent a firm hand. And, since Ren-kun and I are back from that job—which was tutoring, remember?—maybe it’s time we helped out a bit closer to home.”

“Really? Wait—this isn’t just a visit? You’re back?”

He nodded. “I’ll still probably have to go off now and again, but yes, we’re back. You can resume trying to trick me into eating here so you can show off how good of a cook you are.”

She giggled. “Did you teach your student many languages?”

“Well, he was already conversant in a few, but I made certain he became fluent, and understood many of the cultural aspects. I don’t think you’re going to let me haul Tsuna-kun off for months at a time, though. Ren-kun handled a number of normal academic subjects, and I helped the kid with some physical training, to keep him in shape. He’s managing his own foundation now.”

“Oh my,” she said, her eyes drifting off to the side in thought. “But don’t you get paid a lot of money to do things like that?”

‘Huh. I admit, I did not expect her to point that out.’ “To borrow one of your sayings, ‘You’re so silly.’ That’s why I said I’d have to go off every now and again, to do jobs of the normal sort. The same is true for Ren-kun. But you’re my best friend, Nana-chan, and it upsets me to hear that you’re a bit unhappy with Tsuna-kun’s lack of … attention when it comes to his schooling. He’s becoming a young man. He should be more serious in his pursuit of the future.”

She looked at him, her expression oddly sober. Then she smiled and nodded. “But not too serious! Boys should have fun, too. And I’ll just have to cook for you more often, to say thanks for your help.”

He smiled back, which never failed to make her eyes widen slightly in surprise. “Here’s the real question,” he said, leaning in a bit. “Can you cook Italian?”

She gasped. “That’s not fair!”

He propped his head on his fist and smiled again. “We’ll be by a bit later, to see Tsuna-kun and let him know we’ll be taking an active interest in his welfare. And if you want, I can lend you some cookbooks. Though…” He let his gaze roam around the kitchen for a few seconds. “Something tells me you don’t have Western utensils here. Eating lasagne with hashi would be hilarious.”

“I accept your challenge!” she cried, looking determined.

“You came home in the middle of classes again,” Nana said unhappily. “What do you plan to do in the future?”

They shifted a little in their positions in the tree out back, earpieces in place, so they could listen in to
what was being said in the kitten’s room, though considering the window was open they could almost hear everything clearly anyway.

“I don’t know…” came the apathetic response.

“I’m not saying you have to attend a good high school or university, you know,” she continued.

“Don’t barge into my room!”

“Save me from angsty boys,” he muttered, getting a commiserating look from his lover.

“You can live your entire life bored like you are right now,” Nana said, coming into view, a vague frown on her face, which quickly turned to a happy smile, “or live it happily. I want you to live feeling, ‘It’s great to be alive!’ ”

“It’s embarrassing when you say things like that,” Tsuna muttered.

“Oh my. Tsu-kun … a home tutor is coming today! Your Hisui-oji and Ren-oji are back in Japan.”

“Home tutor!?” Tsuna jumped up from his sprawl and faced his mother, panic on his face. “Hisui-san!?”

“Kitten looks like he’s gonna lose control of his bladder,” Renato murmured.

“He’s going to lose more than that once we start shooting him,” he murmured back, smiling slightly.

“That’s right!” Nana said cheerfully. “I’m so happy. Not only is my best friend back in town, but he and his partner will be teaching you!”

The panic on Tsuna’s face notched up. “I refuse to have a tutor! I’m not good at anything I do, anyway!”

“Sounds like our cue,” Renato murmured.

He nodded, and launched himself, landing just inside the window, and quickly side-stepped. Renato landed in the place he had just occupied.

“Hisui-kun! Ren-kun!” Nana beamed at them, then paused. “That’s an odd way to come visit.”

“It was faster that way,” Renato said smoothly, then eyed Tsuna.

“I’m s-sorry, but … there’s nothing I can learn from you,” the boy said.

Renato moved closer, laying a hand across the back of the boy’s neck, and squeezed until the kid squeaked. “Nana-chan, how about we take the kitten for a walk, hm? He’s ditched school for the day, after all.”

“I am not a pet!” Tsuna protested.

Renato squeezed again, warningly.

“Oh, that would be lovely,” Nana replied. “I’m sure you have lots to talk about. But be here for dinner, all right?” She beamed at them and retreated out the door and downstairs.

“Time for that walk, kitten,” Renato said and started urging Tsuna toward the door.
“Stop manhandling me!” Tsuna said, flailing his hands around.

Renato leaned in and said close to the boy’s ear, “Unless you want a collar and a leash, kitten, I suggest you come along.”

“Hiiiiie,” Tsuna squeaked quietly, and allowed himself to be prodded down the stairs and into the entryway, where he quickly slipped on his shoes.

Hisui detached his from his belt and put them on, as did his lover, and the three of them emerged back into the sunlight. In no time flat they had the kid at their house and shoved into a chair. Renato reached in under his jacket and pulled out a gun, then pointed it at Tsuna’s head.

Tsuna’s eyes went so wide it was a wonder they did not lose cohesion and dribble out of his head.

“Our true line of work is assassination,” Renato said. “Our real job is to make you a mafia boss.”

“What!? A mafia boss!?” Tsuna paled and started shaking, too frightened to even think of trying to run, but calmed slightly when Yori pranced in and jumped up onto his lap. One hand went out to cradle the kneazel and the other started petting him, almost absently.

“We were … asked … by a certain man, to train you to become an excellent mafia boss,” he said, “and that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Helloooo? This is all some horrible joke, right? That gun is just a toy, right?” Tsuna calmed down a little further, until Renato pressed the barrel of the gun against his forehead.

“The methods employed are up to us. Should I shoot you, then?”

“Hiiiiie!”

Yori yowled when the boy’s hand tightened uncomfortably in his fur and snaked out a paw to slap Tsuna on the cheek, then jumped down and took position on the sofa, where Leon was lazing.

Hisui conjured a target off to the side, out of Tsuna’s immediate line of vision.

Renato re-aimed his gun. “Watch, kitten, and you tell me.” When Tsuna turned his head Renato fired, putting a hole dead center. “Still think it’s a toy?”

Tsuna toppled off his chair in a dead faint.

He snorted and lifted the kid to lay him on the sofa as Yori and Leon scrambled out of the way. He cast a sleep spell on the kid for the time being and said, “She wasn’t kidding. He’s even worse than Dino, but then Dino knew what kind of family he belonged to.”

As Hisui vanished the target Renato said, “Something tells me the kid is going to be super stubborn, but maybe after he’s been shot the first time he’ll become a bit more malleable. There’s no telling what having his flames sealed might have done to him.”

He shrugged. “The kid was a squeak toy from early on. It may have just reinforced certain aspects of his personality. Or maybe he really is that lame. He seems to have a thing for Sasagawa Kyoko-chan, so…”

Renato nodded. “So we engineer an encounter and use that as an excuse. Leon will tell me when the situation is ripe, and I shoot the kid, he makes a fool of himself, and hopefully his flames get unlocked in the process.”
They talked for some time until Renato seemed to realize something. He glanced at the clock and nodded. “Right, almost time for dinner.”

Nana eyed her son every so often, no doubt wondering why he had that particular look on his face, but refrained from commenting. She trusted Hisui, after all, and was very charmed by Renato. “I’m so happy,” she burbled. “My little Tsu-kun will be learning all sorts of interesting things now.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Nana-chan,” Renato said smoothly. “This is very good, by the way. Are you certain Hisui hasn’t been teaching you on the sly?”

She giggled. “You’re so silly. My mother taught me! Maybe it was my mother who taught Hisui-kun on the sly.”

He snorted and almost smiled. “I don’t think so.” He was pleased—or perhaps relieved—that Nana had recovered from her mother’s passing enough to speak of her so openly. Her letters had been very stilted for a while. He had flown back the moment he’d heard to be there for her, when even Iemitsu had not, which had made him more than a little vexed with the man. It was bad enough the blond did not spend much time in Namimori and, in fact, had not been there for two years.

The next morning Renato got ready to leave, earpiece and connected listening charm in place, to ensure Tsuna got going in time to accidentally-on-purpose run into Kyoko-chan. Hisui was preparing to fly to Italy to go pick up Gokudera. He gave his lover a kiss and said, “All right, Ren-koi. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Come back quickly, tesoro,” Renato purred. “While you’re gone I’ll steal copies of the kitten’s books so we know what we’re dealing with.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” he promised. He was not looking forward to the long flight and planned to lean on Pepper-Up potions if necessary, but once he had the silveret in Namimori they could move on to the introduction and “evaluation”.

Gokudera was as good as his word and met him at the airport in Milan. Hisui had a two hour turn around time before they needed to get to the gate, so he treated the kid to a meal. Gokudera looked nervous and agitated, but held it together, and Hisui made sure no one asked any awkward questions with judicious use of magic.

Gokudera’s energy deserted him once they were in the air and he fell asleep. They would be arriving at around four o’clock, so if necessary he would hit the kid with a timed sleeping spell to ease him through jet lag.

After they landed he located their car and dumped the kid’s cases in the back, then installed him in the passenger seat. Renato had insisted he learn how to drive, so he had left one of the cars in airport parking for his return.

“How much longer?” Gokudera asked, a sullen look on his face.

‘Kami-sama, save me from teenagers.’ “About two hours, depending on traffic. Enjoy the scenery. And speaking of … which would you prefer? Gokudera-kun, or Hayato-kun?”

The kid aimed a suspicious look at him.

“If you don’t specify I’ll use your family name,” he said. “I’m not going to be condescending or assume something, and calling you ‘kid’ all the time is a bit rude. Well, unless you do something stupid enough to deserve it.”
Peripheral vision showed that the kid’s expression eased. “Hayato is fine.”

“All right. Ren-kun might not be so amiable that way, but who knows. He’s a bit outrageous, after all. You can call me Hisui.”

Hayato nodded and looked out the window. “You two are a thing?”

He smiled faintly. “Yes. Very perceptive of you.”

“How long?”

‘And very nosy.’ “Since I was twenty, so coming up on fourteen years,” he said, steering smoothly around a corner.

“And you were fourteen when you started. You were scouted, you said. How come you’ve never…”

“I was deeply suspicious of the man who recruited me, thought he might be a pedophile.”

Hayato was startled into a laugh.

“But he was an upright guy, and he continues to be one of my contacts and offers me jobs. Depending on how things go you may meet him at some point. As for why I never officially joined a famiglia, that’s because I like my freedom. I have ties to several famiglie. It all depends on what you want in life, Hayato-kun. You want a Sky, so we’ll see. Hopefully you’ll be compatible with the kitten and help get him to show his claws when he needs to. You killed anyone yet?”

Hayato’s head whipped around to stare at his profile. “No.”

“When you do, odds are you’re going to lose your stomach for a while. No matter how much the target deserves to die, it still leaves a mark.”

“Who—?”

“More accurately, what,” he replied. “I was offered a job to take out a pedophile, amusingly enough, which proved my contact had a sense of humor. He provided me with a bio, information about the man’s haunts, and proof of his transgressions. Proof is important, Hayato-kun. Always know why you’re doing something. A lot of what the mafia does is take care of those issues that the mundanes cannot.”

“You—mundanes?”

“Normal people,” he replied. “You know what you are, yes?”

“Uh, they said I was a Storm.”

He nodded. “You can be one of two things, Hayato-kun. You can be the fury of the storm, or you can be the eye of the storm. Both are good. It all depends on the situation. You’re a smart kid, so use those smarts. Be the eye of the storm and don’t rush into things blindly if you can avoid it. Be its fury when you must protect yourself, your Sky, your fellow guardians, or innocents, but do so from that calm center, where you can think, and plan, and adapt.”

When they arrived in Namimori he parked outside the building they had purchased and gave Hayato a hand in bringing in his cases, even going so far as to unlock and open the door for him. Inside he handed over the key and gave him a very brief tour, which consisted of pointing so he would not
have to remove his shoes and leave the entryway, then woke up his phone and dialed. “Yes, I’m back… Sure, I’ll ask… See you soon.” After putting it back in his pocket he looked at the boy and said, “You want to have dinner with us tonight? The cupboards here are stocked, but I can’t imagine you’ll be wanting to cook just yet.”

“Uh…” The suspicion was back, but only faintly. “Fine.”

He nodded. “Drop your things off and we’ll go. I’ll bring you back after, and then tomorrow we’ll get things started.”

Hayato dragged his cases into the bedroom and was back in a flash, so they returned to the car and got in. The drive was short, but then Namimori was hardly a bustling city. Hayato seemed surprised at the size of the house as Hisui pulled the car into its spot and turned off the engine.

The kid started slightly when Hisui paused to remove his shoes before stepping up, and did likewise. Hisui led him to the kitchen and grabbed a cigarette from the waiting pack, and lit up, inhaling greedily. So many damn hours on planes and never being allowed to smoke was a level of hell. Hayato blinked and pulled a pack from his pocket. Hisui nodded and gestured at the ashtray as Renato came into the room and deftly inserted himself close while still avoiding the cigarette, and gave him a welcoming kiss.

“Finally! I had to subsist on delivery while you were gone,” Renato complained as he moved away, then looked at Hayato. “Prepare for a gastronomical delight.”

“And what exactly were you planning to convince me to cook?” he asked, eyeing his lover with amusement.

“…Oyakodon?” Renato said hopefully. “With miso soup?”

He glanced at Hayato, who shrugged. “You like chicken?” When the boy nodded he waved at one of the chairs. “All right. You have fun while I was gone?”

Hayato sat down and lit up, but followed Hisui’s movements around the kitchen as he gathered ingredients and started to work, cigarette often angled off to the side.

“You could say that,” Renato replied with a chuckle. “The kitten is now both mortified and confused. On the one hand, people think he’s a pervert. On the other hand, he won an alleged kendo fight against some kid named Mochida.”

He glanced back over his shoulder skeptically. “Won? At kendo?”

“Yes,” Renato said, chuckling again. “His idea of winning was to pull out all the kid’s hair, though. Poor guy’s gonna be bald for a while.”

He snorted and paused long enough to take a drag and exhale before getting back to work.

“So, Gokudera, you willing to help teach the kitten Italian?”

“Assuming he’s worth it,” Hayato said a bit doubtfully.

“We’ll see. There’s a volleyball game coming up. You can lurk in the background for that. I’ll make sure the kitten plays.”

“Let me know when,” he said. “I had planned to get Hayato-kun enrolled, so it may as well be the same day.”
“Tuesday. That gives Gokudera here a little time to adjust. Also, I got those books, so we can go over them. I’ve no idea what they’re like in comparison to what you used when you were in school.”

He shrugged. “I can’t imagine they’d be too terribly different. I’ll do the enrollment on Tuesday, then. Hayato-kun, you know how to use hashi?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” A few minutes later he was sliding food on the table along with drinks. He sat down as Renato said, “Itadakimasu.”

Hayato copied him after a slight pause, then started eating, though his expression was wary.

Hisui just ignored the behavior, knowing from Shamal what Bianchi was like. “It’s immodest of me to say this, but … how wonderful it is to eat real food again, and not something on a plane. How they get away with claiming that slop is food…”

“It’s not like either of us will be taking jobs out of the country any time soon,” Renato said.

Hayato looked up from his meal. “You still do jobs, even if you’re tutoring this kid?”

“Of course,” he said. “Assholes don’t stop being assholes, and we’re far from being ready to retire. And if you fit as the kitten’s Storm, don’t think you won’t be seeing some tutoring yourself.”

“I do really well in school,” Hayato protested.

Renato rolled his eyes. “Kid, you ever manifested your flames? Didn’t think so. There’s plenty for you to learn. Don’t get cocky until you can back it up.”

Hayato got a look on his face that was pure rebellion and threatened imminent explosion, so Hisui manifested six senbon and sent them to hover right in front of the kid’s face. “Don’t be doing something stupid in my house.”

All the colour drained from the kid’s face as he went cross-eyed staring at the gleaming glass. “You’re Phantom?”

“Some idiot out there came up with that name, yes.”

The kid switched gears again, that time into puppy mode. “Really? Wow! I’ve heard so much about you!”

He released the senbon and said, “Then do me a favor and keep the dramatics elsewhere.”

“I am feeling left out, here,” Renato muttered.

Hayato switched focus. “But you’re really cool, too! It’s just—”

“—so few people know who Phantom is, I get it,” Renato said. “Seriously, kid, there’s always something to learn. Don’t think you’ve reached the heights at a mere thirteen years of age. Not every adult you meet is an enemy, capisci?”

Hayato started eating again rather than answer, but the fact that he looked away fairly quickly said so much.

He walked the kid back to his new apartment, planning to return a little later to ensure the boy slept. “If you want breakfast just come by the house. Otherwise, I’ll be here at ten to show you around
Hayato nodded and flicked the ashes off his cigarette.

“All right. Have a good night,” he said once they reached the place, then left after Hayato was inside and he heard the lock click.

“So…”

He acquired a cat on his way to the sofa and spent a minute scratching Yori before he said anything.

“Well, the kid’s perceptive. He pegged us as a couple in no time flat, and he even waited until we were in the car on the way from the airport to say anything.”

“Discretion, huh? I expect further incidents of that will be few and far between. As you two were walking out I had a good look at the kid with Leon. He’s got to have five different flames, though Storm is predominant. If he decides to have kids with a Mist he might end up producing a Sky in his line.”

“That’s kind of stunning, actually.”

Renato indicated a stack of books on the table. “Well, regarding the kitten. I arranged for him to run into that girl he’s mooning over, which triggered the expected regret. I got him all worked up after she continued on and then shot him. He keeled over, went flame-active, and raced off like the devil was on his heels.”

“So, the same as Dino.”

“Yes.”

“Did the listening charm stick through it?”

“It did, which was good. Allowed me to hear all sorts of hilarious things, like Tsuna being hit by a delivery man on a bike. Anyway, he found her, asked her to go out with him, and she ran off. Then Mochida nailed him in the face and called him a pervert. I explained a few things about the bullets, what we were training him for, showed him those ‘photographs’ of Nono’s sons, that sort of thing.”

“And he freaked out and squeaked like a newborn kitten,” he said, nodding. “And the kendo match?”

“Mochida is captain of the kendo team and was apparently seeing Sasagawa, and before you ask, not anymore. Tsuna tried to duck out of the challenge Mochida presented, but, well, I made sure he participated. As I said, the school thinks he’s a pervert now for running around in his underwear, but they also know he can be a badass at times, so opinions are divided. I do think they’re a bit mystified at his choice of how to win the match, though.”

He thought back to what Renato had said and snickered. “I assume you went through his work?”

“Yes,” Renato said with a heavy sigh. “To use your favorite word, it was pathetic. The kid fails hard, and I can’t tell yet if it’s because he’s lazy, has trouble with comprehension, or because he doesn’t see the point.”

“Eh?”

Renato shrugged. “If it’s comprehension we can work with that. If he doesn’t see the point, we can find one, even if it involves explosions. If he’s lazy?”
He huffed. “We’ll run him into the ground. I told Hayato-kun I’d show him around town tomorrow. I’ll make sure he knows he can get a part-time job at that one convenience store. Even if the kid doesn’t click I don’t doubt he’d want to stay here, if only to be away from his family. And I can shadow him on a job if it comes to that.”

“Doable. Now, I know how much you want to dive into those books, but…”

Hayato showed up at eight o’clock. Renato had long since disappeared to torture Tsuna, so Hisui was the one to let the kid in by the expedient of checking the monitor for the camera hidden out there and then reaching out to open the door from the kitchen. Hayato seemed startled by the door just opening by itself and then closing behind him, but appeared in the kitchen a minute later.

“Have a seat,” he said. “Traditional Japanese breakfast, or perhaps something a little closer to home?”

Hayato gave him a blank look; he probably had no idea what Hisui meant.

He nodded and started cooking. Two traditional breakfasts coming up, with a side of “closer to home” in case the kid hated the stuff. He also prepared a fish for Yori as a treat, though Hayato gave him a weird look for it.

He spent the better part of the day showing the kid around town, making sure to cruise through the convenience store at one point to pick up cigarettes he did not yet actually need, all so Hayato could coincidentally notice the place was looking for a worker. Of course, that made him wonder how the kid was going to manage to buy cigarettes at his age in a strange country. He shrugged slightly; if the kid needed help he would just have to say so. On the other hand, Suda was pretty laid back in some respects, so if Hayato got a job there he might well be able to convince the old man to look the other way.

On Monday he went over the books, sharing them with Hayato, so the boy would have some idea of what to expect from his new school. There was nothing much of interest in them aside from changes to the history texts and a firm emphasis on students learning at least English in addition to their native one.

On Tuesday he hauled Hayato over to Namimori Middle and worked his magic to not only get the boy enrolled as a first year, but placed in the same class as Tsuna. He arranged things so they would have some time to get Hayato a working idea of the school’s layout before heading to the gym where the game would take place.

“The game will start shortly,” he heard in his earpiece.

“We’re on our way,” he replied, refreshing the spell over the two of them to keep them less noticeable. Hibari was wandering around somewhere, no doubt, and it was best not to push his buttons.

Along the way he heard, “Chaos.”

“Shoot me with the Dying Will Bullet! There’s no time!”

“…I can shoot you, but you’ll die,” Renato said seriously. “If you don’t regret anything when you’re shot with a Dying Will Bullet, you won’t revive. And will you, all cocky from the compliments after that kendo challenge, have any regrets?”

“S-so… it’s unusable!?”
“Want to try it out anyway?” Renato asked dangerously.

“No, it’s okay! It’s really okay!”

“Well, good luck, hero.”

Renato had to have used Leon’s abilities to disappear, for the next thing he heard Kyoko was there to haul Tsuna off to the gym. “All right, I’m heading to my next position,” he heard Renato say.

He and Hayato entered the gym to find it was packed; there was even a set of students with a banner bearing “Tsuna” on it. Tsuna, when he arrived, being more or less dragged by Kyoko, paled at the sight of all the people, but held it together enough to take his place for the game.

“Tch,” Hayato said after Tsuna took a volleyball to the groin. “This is…”

He didn’t bother to comment, just kept watching Nana’s little Tsu-kun get wailed on by an inanimate object repeatedly. The kid was dying of humiliation, but he didn’t flee, which was interesting. The crowd, which had previously welcomed Tsuna, was slowly moving through disappointment to disgust, and his teammates were getting angry if their expressions meant anything.

At the end of the first set Tsuna tried to duck out; his sheepish expression and body language said what their hearing could not pick up. But as the boy turned to go, he paused, eyeing his teammates one by one. Then he took off for the doors.

“Now we wait,” he murmured to Hayato. “See how this plays out.”

“Not going home?” he heard Renato ask.

“Yeah. I’m going.”

“Later.” A minute later he heard, “He’s heading back in. Looks like he plans to finish the game.”

“I think he finally realized that all his teammates were in various states of injury and thought about someone other than himself,” he replied.

“Heading to a sniper position.”

Tsuna came back in and walked up to his teammates, a look of resigned determination on his face.

“Since you seem to get it, take this,” Renato muttered.

Tsuna jerked back and landed on his ass, then sat up and examined his legs.

“What just happened?” Hayato muttered, lighting a cigarette.

“Just a little help is all,” he replied. The second half of the game was markedly different. Having been shot in the legs resulted in a different effect from Leon’s altered bullets. Tsuna was jumping around like Dino had that first time, and was easily able to get into position to hit the ball back instead of being hit by it.

The second the game ended he touched Hayato’s arm and left. Renato would take care of the aftermath. “So what do you think so far?” he asked Hayato once they were halfway to the shop that supplied school uniforms.

“I’m not sure yet. But—he did go back. Even if he thought he was going to let them down again, he still went back to finish it.”
At the house, during dinner, Hayato rolled his eyes slightly and sighed. He sounded like one of them already. “After I’m introduced to the class I need to intimidate him, and spend some time giving him a look,” he said, repeating back the plan. “At break he’ll probably take off, possibly intending to ditch school early again, and I need to catch up with him outside and confront him.”

“You’ll have five minutes, kid, once I trigger his flames. Say what you want about why you’re attacking, so long as he thinks you’re serious. If you can knock him out within those five minutes…”

“Then we’ll talk about my Plan B, I got it. You two will be nearby.”

“Yes. Either way, you’ll probably be coming back here afterward.” He hoped that they would not need to go to Plan B, because that meant teaching the kid how to be an assassin instead of a guardian, and for a kid who attacked using dynamite, that meant coming up with some very creative lesson ideas. Realistically, it meant teaching the kid to use a gun in addition to other tactics with dynamite. “Just remember to make your first attack simple so we can get the introductions done with.”

He went to the school with Renato the next morning to plant listening charms on the two and tie them to their earpieces, as well as place trackers, then headed off to where Tsuna usually spent his breaks when trying to get away from people. If Tsuna chose to go elsewhere he would find him and speed himself and his lover there to be in place.

When the time came they watched as Tsuna barreled around the corner and flattened himself against the wall, breathing heavily. “That was close. I could have been beaten up,” he said to himself. “You’re something else, aren’t you.”

Tsuna’s gaze jerked over to see Gokudera lighting up. “You—you’re the transfer student! I—I’ll just be leaving now.” He got two steps away before Hayato spoke again.

“If a squeaky little thing like you becomes Jūdaime, the Vongola Famiglia is finished.”

Tsuna froze, then twisted back around. “Huh? How do you know about that?”

Hayato turned to face Tsuna with a menacing expression darkly painting his face. “I refuse to accept it. I’m the one who’s fit to be Jūdaime!”

“What are you saying all of a sudden? Wha—how am I supposed to react to that!?”

Hayato shoved his hands in his pockets and angled the cigarette to the side of his mouth. “I’ve been watching you since the volleyball tournament, but it’s a waste of time to further evaluate a weakling like you,” he said harshly.

“You were … watching?” Tsuna’s eyes went wide.

In a flash, Hayato’s hands were out of his pockets, each one holding a stick of dynamite. “You’re just a nuisance. You’ll die right here,” he promised. As Tsuna began to freak out Hayato lit the two sticks with his cigarette and prepared to fling them forward, saying, “Later.”

Hisui stripped away the charms keeping them from being noticed and lifted his gun. He shot as the sticks were halfway between the two boys, cutting right through the fuses. They were rendered quiescent, but Tsuna still fell on his ass in abject fear.

“Chaos,” Renato greeted.
“Hiiiiiiie!”
“You came earlier than we expected, Gokudera Hayato,” Renato smilingly lied.
“You know each other!?" Tsuna squeaked.
“Yes. He’s a member of a famiglia we invited over from Italy,” he said.
“So this guy is in the mafia!?”
‘Kami-sama, does the kid ever lay off on the freaking out bit?’
“It’s our first time meeting him, as well, though,” Renato lied.
Hayato rolled with it. “So you’re the Kyudaime’s highly trusted assassins.”
Tsuna’s expression went from “about to piss my pants” to bemused.
“You weren’t kidding about me becoming a candidate as the successor if I kill Sawada, right?”
“That’s right,” he said over the sound of Tsuna having a panic attack.
“Well,” Renato said, “let’s get on with the killing. Haven’t got all day.”
“Hey! Wait!” Tsuna jumped up and darted forward a few steps. “Killing me…? What are you talking about? You’re joking, right!?”
“We’re serious,” he said flatly.
“You—you’re—this is betrayal!” Tsuna cried. “You mean everything until now was a lie!?”
‘It’s been a couple of days,’ he thought disbelievingly. ‘What “everything” is there yet?’
“That’s incorrect,” Renato said, lifting his gun and aiming. “I’m telling you to fight.”
Tsuna froze in place for a few seconds while he had a fresh freak-out, then bolted. Hayato blinked out of his menacing look for a second, then snarled and produced more dynamite. He cast a quick look at the two of them, then attacked, purposely missing the first time, despite having tossed a good dozen or so sticks.
Then the sound died down Renato said conversationally, “It’s said that Gokudera is a human explosive device who conceals dynamite all over his body. His other name is Smokin’ Bomb Hayato.”
“What!? That’s even worse! You’ve got to be kidding!”
“Die!” Hayato drove Tsuna into a dead end, then brought out yet more dynamite. “This is it,” he promised. In a flash of movement the sticks were lit and thrown.
“Fight with your Dying Will,” Renato practically sang, then shot Tsuna in the head.
Tsuna popped back up remarkably fast with a cry of, “Reborn!” He darted forward with amazing speed, putting out fuses before the sticks could detonate. “I’ll put out the fuses with my Dying Will!”
Hayato’s expression went weird for a moment, then he lit and threw more dynamite, then prepared twice as much and tried again, and again. Tsuna kept up, kept defusing everything Hayato threw at
him. “Triple bomb!” Hayato muttered and went to throw again, but one single stick slipped away and landed at his feet as he started to fling his burden forward. It surprised him so badly all of them tumbled from his hands. “Shit.”

“I did tell him to fight from the eye,” he muttered. “Going to have to work on that.”

Renato nodded, but kept his eyes on Tsuna, who was defusing everything that fell.

Hayato’s cigarette fell from his mouth, but he caught it before it could re-ignite any of the scattered sticks that Tsuna had already taken care of.

The brilliant flames that bathed Tsuna’s face in flickering orange sputtered and died. The kid heaved a sigh of relief. “Somehow I made it.”

Hayato cast a look their way, nodded slightly, and went into puppy mode, dropping to his knees. “I was mistaken!” he cried. “You’re the one who’s fit to be the boss! I’ll follow you, Jūdaime! Command me!”

Tsuna twisted around mid-motion while standing up and almost fell over. “Wha—?”

“Having the loser serve under the winner is a famiglia rule,” Renato said matter-of-factly.

“Actually,” Hayato said, getting up, “I didn’t have any ambitions to become Jūdaime. It’s just that when I heard the new boss was a Japanese guy the same age as me, I felt I had to test his strength. But you’re much more than I expected! For putting yourself on the line to save me, I’ll place my life in your hands!”

Tsuna squeaked and flailed his hands around. “That’s troubling… Like lives and such… Normal classmates will be enough, right?”

Hayato’s puppy look morphed to menacing. “Absolutely not.”

Tsuna’s hands dropped like they were weighted with lead.

“Gokudera became your subordinate because of your actions,” Renato said. “Good job, Tsuna.”

He wondered just how exhausting it must be to freak out so much of the time as he watched Tsuna have another meltdown. As the kitten was babbling and stuttering out nonsense he felt three people approach from the school.

“Oh no, no, these guys are cutting class,” came a mocking voice. “This requires some punishment.”

“You’re only allowed to cut starting third year,” said the second thug.

“How many teeth do you want broken?” said the third.

‘I would have to take so many naps,’ he thought as Renato leaned against the wall next to him. ‘I suppose in that sense, Tsuna does have a fair amount of stamina, but we can work on that. He’s only thirteen, after all.’

“Leave it to me,” Hayato growled, and produced yet more dynamite.

How he managed to pack so much into his pockets was something that mystified Hisui, but then he remembered just how many flames the kid had. He was probably unconsciously using his Cloud Flames to propagate copies of a base amount. There was no other explanation for it. But it did bode well for the kid in the future.
“Wait! Hold on! Gokudera-kun, don’t use dynamite!”

“I’ll get rid of them,” Hayato promised, then acted.

“Hiiiiie!” As soon as the third years were down and unconscious, Tsuna bolted again.

Hayato stayed long enough to say, “I’ll make sure he gets home okay. See you this evening!” then dashed after his new boss.

He shook his head slowly and pushed away from the wall. He was preparing dinner when Renato eyed Hayato and said, “Well?”

Hayato nodded. “Yeah. He’ll be a good boss.”

“But not such a good student.”

“I can help with that!” Hayato said eagerly. “I’ll study with him after school when I can, help him out. I’ll even try to keep him from ditching so much.”

“All right,” he said. “We’ll give you two some time to mesh, so you won’t see much of us, but one of us will likely be around to keep an eye out.”

“People are gonna find out,” Hayato said seriously.

“Precisely,” Renato said. “So don’t expect help, but know that it’s there if it’s necessary. We can’t fight Tsuna’s battles for him. That’s not why we’re here. Once you two have settled in, maybe get a few more guardians in line, we can talk about serious training. For now, help him out, get to know him.”

“I will!”

“If he’s too resistant to getting his grades up, well, we have our ways,” Renato promised with a sharp smile.

“You have a standing dinner invitation, Hayato-kun,” he informed the kid. “If you don’t feel like cooking or aren’t having dinner at Tsuna-kun’s house, you can come here. But send me a text first, to make sure I’m actually here. Ren-kun can’t cook to save his life, after all.”

He was perched in a tree overlooking the field when he saw Hayato wave at Tsuna and head off. Hayato claimed it was so he could replenish his supply of dynamite, but for all he knew Hayato had a fear of baseball and slipped away so as to avoid being pressed into play. Or, perhaps, he was ducking out to a job.

The remaining students in the class milled around, but half of them started eyeing Tsuna. Yamamoto Takeshi strolled over to Tsuna and said, “Isn’t it all right? Just join our team.”

“Are you serious, Yamamoto-kun?” one of the boys complained. “You don’t have to let that loser in.”

Yamamoto slung an arm around the boy’s shoulders in a friendly way. “Don’t be so stingy. I just have to keep them from hitting, right?”

The other boys on the team slumped and agreed, and the game was on. Tsuna was miserable at it,
naturally, and ended up with more than a few bumps from being wailed by a baseball. The team sent any number of glares and scowls at the kitten, and told him to sweep the field by himself after the game and the class was over.

“Yamamoto-kun seems like a potential candidate,” he said. “Very athletic, skilled, and popular. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s a Rain with the kind of tranquility he’s been displaying.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him, then,” Renato sent back.

Tsuna just stood there, push broom in hand, head lowered, but then Yamamoto arrived with a broom of his own. “Help has arrived.”

“Yamamoto-kun!”

He only half listened until Yamamoto admitted to Tsuna that no matter how much he practiced lately, his average was dropping, and he was starting to mess up fielding. He had blown at least one catch during the game, in fact. “Tsuna-kun, what should I do?”

He sighed when Tsuna freaked out and said, “You’re asking me!?”

“Yamamoto-kun seems to think the kitten is a good person to ask for advice.”

“Really now,” Renato sent. “Maybe now that Tsuna’s flames are unlocked he’s starting to draw people in. We definitely need to keep an eye on this one. If Tsuna can nab him for a guardian his reputation in school will stay afloat, occasional perverted boxer runs aside, and it might draw more in because they’ll notice him as a person and not Dame-Tsuna.”

“Yes.”

That evening they went to visit Nana, though after a few minutes of conversation they headed upstairs to Tsuna’s room. The kitten was playing video games instead of doing his homework. Renato made himself comfortable on a chair and started cleaning one of his guns. Hisui perched on the window sill.

“Something good happen?” Renato asked casually.

“You can tell?” Tsuna replied, eyes glued to his game. “Today a popular kid came to me for advice. Man, what to do, what to do.”

“Yeah, about that. Yamamoto—”

The controller in Tsuna’s hands flipped free and hit the floor as he cried, “How did you know!?”

“You should make him your subordinate.”

Tsuna twisted around, hands on the floor to steady himself. “Wha—!? Absolutely not! Yamamoto-kun is hot on baseball. I only want to help him out as a friend!”

“We’ll see.”

Renato was on duty the next day when Hisui got an alert over the earpiece. “Yamamoto flipped out.”

“What happened?” he murmured.

“He took Tsuna’s advice about trying harder a little too seriously and ended up practicing so hard last night he messed up his arm. He’s up on the roof right now, looking to jump.”
“Eh…?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Renato promised. “Just wanted you to know.”

A few minutes later he heard, “You want to help Yamamoto as a friend, right? Then don’t run away.”

“Wait! Time out!” Tsuna was panicking again.

“Huh. He ran away.”

He snorted and tossed more stuff in his basket. He planned to bake up some sweets to take over to Nana. As he was heading to the checkout he heard, “Hm, Tsuna ran more or less blindly, and yet he still ended up on the roof. He’s talking with Yamamoto, apologizing … explaining … he’s apologizing again … preparing to leave… Yamamoto just whipped out a hand and grabbed the kitten by the back of the—shit, hang on.”

He had just made it to the checkout when he heard the gunshot. Then a second one. He knew Renato would tell him what had happened, but he had to admit he was insanely curious. It wasn’t until he was outside the store and walking home that his lover spoke again.

“Right. Yamamoto managed to send them both over the edge of the roof, but it’s fine. Suicide attempt averted. Yamamoto has this dopey look on his face now. Looks like Tsuna snared another one. We’ll have to bring the kid into the fold soon.”

“We’re going to end up a halfway house for kids at this rate,” he muttered.

“Ah, tesoro, I already know you like Gokudera. You were half way to offering him a room already. It’s Tsuna who’s the pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, well, Hayato-kun needs to feel like he’s doing things on his own. I can’t mess with that too much.”

“You still planning to visit Nana today?”

“Tomorrow.”

“All right. I have a little meddling to do this evening, then.”

He furrowed his brow, trying to think what that could mean. He shrugged and continued on; Renato would tell him later.

“You did what?”

Renato smiled charmingly and sidled closer. “It was just a little fun,” he said. “Nana was being all humble like you Japanese tend to do and called her kitten no good. I’ve never understood taking humility quite that far, but whatever. The point is, after Nana set down the drinks tray and left, Leon let me know that Kyoko was feeling regret, so I suggested a little game of Russian Roulette.”

“I’m afraid to know what happened,” he said with a sigh.

“I might have accidentally-on-purpose loaded a Dying Will Bullet into the gun. Kyoko volunteered to go first, shot herself in the head, and popped back up all raring to go. Tsuna went down with a gushing nosebleed, naturally. It was strange, though. She was eerily calm as she stood up, walked out and downstairs—almost straight through a wall, even. You might want to go over there in a bit
and check to see if any repairs need to be made, after Nana goes to sleep. Kyoko calmly terrorized Nana, trying to get an apology out of her."

“And you resolved this, how?” he asked, feeling twinges of anger.

“I went ahead and whacked her with Leon in mallet form. Jolted her back into a normal state of mind. The girl thinks it was all a dream thanks to Leon’s abilities with memories. So does Nana. I like your friend, tesoro, but even you have to admit she’s a bit … clueless.”

He sighed. “She is.”

“Of course, Tsuna got all confused, thinking the girl was mad about Nana referring to her as Tsuna’s girlfriend rather than the cultural insult. Hopeless, that one.”

“How did you even get the girl over there?”

“I spotted her in a shop and ordered some espresso, and then made like I forgot my wallet. She offered to pay for it, and I brought her back to the Sawada house so I could ‘find’ my money and repay her. That got her into the room with Tsuna.”

“You are so opportunistically devious at times it makes my head hurt,” he complained.

“That’s what makes us such a good team, tesoro,” Renato said gaily. “You’re straightforward and practical, and good with the little ones for some reason, and I’m devious as hell. We help cover each other’s blind spots.”

He sighed and leaned in for a kiss. “You owe me one for putting Nana-chan in danger. I’ll figure out what I want as a favor when the need arises.”

Renato laughed a little nervously and nodded.

The next day they went over to Nana’s after Tsuna got out of school. Hisui brought along a cloth-wrapped box of sweets as a gift, and because he knew how much Nana liked them. Renato went upstairs to torture the kitten over his maths homework while he visited for a little while first. He blithely ignored the sounds of explosions coming from the first floor (“It’s probably just one of Tsuna-kun’s video games,” he said.) and invited Nana to try a different sweet.

When the doorbell rang, however, he began to pay attention. Nana went off to answer the door, but she didn’t see the little fellow who scurried inside and made for the stairs. The intruder was dressed in a cow onesie, had afro-like hair, and was sporting a set of bull horns to either side of his head. ‘Bovino Famiglia?’ he wondered, then strolled out of the kitchen and upstairs, after letting Nana know it was time for him to help out Renato.

“Long time no see, Reborn!” he heard the little boy say—he could not have been more than five years old, if that. “Lambo-san is here!”

“Hiiiie! He came in! Do you know him!?”

“Remember this formula,” Renato said, utterly ignoring the child.

Lambo growled. “Hey, don’t ignore Lambo-san! Lambo-san will kill you, damn it!” He charged forward with a knife in his hand, only for Renato to lash out and deflect the kid into the wall.

Hisui slipped into the room and closed the door, just in case Nana should decide to come upstairs, and eyed the intruder curiously.
“Oh, that hurt,” Lambo whimpered, his face smushed against the wall. “Lambo-san must have tripped.” The child fell back onto his tush and scooted around, then yelled out, “Lambo-san, five years old, from Italy, a hitman from the Bovino Famiglia, tripped!! Favorite foods are grapes, takoyaki, and candy, and Lambo-san, who met Reborn at a bar, just tripped!!”

‘What is this strange feeling?’ he wondered. ‘Kid sure has an odd way of introducing himself.’

“So yeah, Lambo-san will try again. Yo, Reborn! Lambo-san is here!”

Renato continued to ignore the tyke and showed a paper to Tsuna, who was dividing his attention between his tutor and the child. “Solve this using that formula,” Renato said calmly.

“No… yeah,” Tsuna said, wrenching his full focus back to Renato.

Lambo went all teary-eyed at the lack of attention he was getting, then turned away and started rummaging in a bag he pulled out of nowhere, mumbling to himself.

‘What is it with these kids and defying the laws of physics?’

“F-four, I think,” Tsuna said.

Renato smiled faintly. “Yes, four is correct.”

Lambo let out a watery laugh and turned around. “Lambo-san borrowed a lot of weapons from the boss,” he said, “that are passed down in the Bovino Famiglia!”

Tsuna sent a quick, sidelong glance at the child, but quickly focused on Renato again, probably afraid of being blown up.

Lambo whipped a huge bazooka out of his hair. “Ta~da! The Ten Year Bazooka! Those who are shot with this can, for five minutes, switch with their self of ten years in the future! But this is only a sample presentation. It’ll be a waste, so Lambo-san will put it away.”

He exchanged a look with Renato. His lover quirked a brow in a way that said, “Fuck if I know.”

“Oh my!” Lambo said theatrically. “Lambo-san found something good. Oh no! What might this be?” he said, then pulled a bright pink grenade out of his hair.

“What?” Tsuna cried. “A hand grenade?”

“Correct!” Lambo said and flicked the pin free. “Die, Reborn!” The grenade went flying.

‘Decent aim,’ he thought. ‘Probably needs work from a greater distance.’

His lover lashed out again as Tsuna’s eyes bugged out, knocking the grenade back into Lambo with such force the child and the grenade went flying out the window, to explode over the yard.

“Let’s move on to the next question,” Renato said coolly.

“Hiiie,” Tsuna squeaked more quietly than usual. “You didn’t have to do that much. You know him, right?”

Renato shook his head.

“Eh?”
“Either way,” Renato expanded, “if it’s the Bovino Famiglia, they’re a rather small mafia group. I don’t associate with those who rank lower.”

Tsuna slumped, then sat up straight when they all heard Nana call his name. He got up and opened the door after Hisui slid to the side, and headed to the stairs as Nana said, “Come here!”

He followed quietly to see Nana standing there with a sobbing Lambo, who had one hand gripping Nana’s capris. “He knows Ren-kun, right? Did something happen? Well, I’ll leave it to you to sort out, Tsu-kun, while I make dinner.”

Lambo detached himself from Nana and latched onto Tsuna instead. Hisui couldn’t see the kid’s face, but he could tell from the body language that the kitten was freaking out again.

“I’ll call him for you, okay?”

Lambo went into full hysterics at that, and Tsuna rushed him out of the house, but not before Hisui got off a listening charm and tied it to the earpiece he always carried. He put that in place and went back into the bedroom.

“Seems like it’s time to go home,” he said.

They made it to the entryway and he almost had a hand on the doorknob when Nana poked her head out of the kitchen. “You’re staying, right?”

‘Damn, and I really wanted to hear the story on that cow kid.’ “Of course,” he said. “We were just coming down to see if you needed any help.”

Renato laughed.

He poked his lover in the side. “You may not be able to cook, but there’s nothing saying you can’t set a table.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Nana said. “I don’t need any help. But come in and sit down!” She retreated back into the kitchen.

A half hour later Tsuna returned, just in time for dinner, with Lambo in tow. The little kid refused to let go of Tsuna’s leg—until he smelled the food. Then he hopped up onto a seat and beamed at Nana.

“It’s fine,” she said, setting servings of miso soup and chanpurū on the table. “The more the merrier.”

“Nana-chan,” he said, “where’s yours?”

“Oh, I’ll have mine shortly. I need to go deliver this circular bulletin next door.”

The second the front door closed Tsuna half rose out of his seat so he could lean across the table. “Do something! I can’t handle him!” he cried, gesturing toward Lambo.

‘Oh, so talking to a small child, or dealing with it snotting all over you is a burden too heavy to bear,’ he thought, noting that his lover had angled himself away slightly from the tyke.

“Oh, sure, ignore me now,” Tsuna grumbled.

Lambo grit his teeth, produced a knife, and threw it. “Take that!”

Renato lashed out a hand again. He caught the knife, reversed it, and threw it back, all in a split
second. It landed dead center on Lambo’s forehead. More than just that snarl of hair was holding it in place, too, because a rivulet of blood trickled down to part and flow to either side of the child’s nose. “Learn already,” Renato hissed quietly, then went back to eating.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed as Lambo slid sideways off his chair, then went to huddle in the corner. A few seconds later that bazooka came out again, and the kid aimed it at himself. How he could hold up something that big was a mystery. He grabbed a little piece of string tied to the trigger and pulled.

Once the smoke cleared he could see a young man, perhaps a little older than Tsuna, wearing a dark jacket with a cow-print shirt underneath. His one visible eye was the same green as Lambo’s.

“My oh my, seems I was brought back ten years,” the boy said, then gave Tsuna a quick wave. “Long time no see, young Vongola Jūdai. Thank you for taking care of me ten years ago. I’m the crybaby, Lambo.”

“Say what!?”

Hisui nabbed a peapod with his hashi and ate it, content to just watch. Renato continued to ignore everything on that side of the room.

“Hey, Reborn,” Lambo said. “I changed, didn’t I? Lambo, the one you kept ignoring?” After still not getting even a hint of attention, Lambo stiffened and reached into his pockets, pulling a set of bull horns out. “Looks like I have to use my skills, then. I’ll show you how much I’ve changed in ten years.” He attached them—somehow—to his head, and muttered, “Thunder set.”

Hisui quirked an eyebrow as an arc of lightning somehow made its way into the kitchen and hit Lambo, causing his horns to start crackling with electricity. “My horns are one million volts,” Lambo said. “Die, Reborn! Electric Horns!” And then he charged.

Renato lashed out with a fork he should not have had handy and pinned the kid on the crown of his head. Lambo stopped dead, his lips started trembling, and then he fled entirely. Renato finished up the last of his meal and looked unhappy.

Several minutes later Nana returned with a five year old Lambo in tow. “Tsu-kun,” she said sternly. “I asked you to sort this out. Lambo-kun says he just wants to be friends with Ren-kun.” She turned away to get herself food.


Nana gasped and turned around.

“Mama, I’d like more, please,” Renato said.

Her eyes went from the hallway to Renato. “Mama?”

“Oh,” Renato said smoothly, “I was just remembering that little story Hisui told me about when you were still carrying Tsuna.”

Nana giggled. “He did threaten that, didn’t he. And I threatened to use Midori as a name if I had a girl. You’re so silly,” she said, and took his plate. She handed it back a few moments later, a second helping heaped atop it, then finished getting her own meal ready.

“Thank you,” Renato said warmly.
When they finally got home he pinned his lover with a look. “Spill.”

“Oh all right,” Renato said, heaving a sigh. “I ‘met’ the little cow in a bar. Why his boss decided to bring the kid in there is beyond me, but I—you know I don’t like young kids. I ignored him and his endless chatter. The kid is obviously a Lightning. He couldn’t possibly be anything else with that personality.”

“Well, he told Tsuna that he wants to become boss of the Bovino Famiglia and make all humanity bow down to him. But his boss told him he had to defeat, and I quote, ‘the super first-class hitman’. Which reminds me. Why is he calling you Reborn?”

“He kept stuttering trying to say my name, so he started using the meaning in English instead.” Renato shrugged.

“He’s going to be Tsuna’s Lightning Guardian, isn’t he?”

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Renato commented as Hayato took a seat at the kitchen table and lit up.

Hayato exhaled before saying, “I got caught up in making sure I was good with the classes here, and working.”

“Oh? Found a part-time job?”

Hayato nodded. “There was a convenience store that needed help and was willing to hire someone my age, so I jumped on it. I should be able to save enough to keep on top of the rent. Are you really going to let that Yamamoto kid into the famiglia?”

“He’s already in it,” Renato replied.

“But he’s so touchy-feely!” Gokudera protested. “He’s always slinging an arm around Jūdaime’s shoulders or giving him one of those slaps on the back. He shouldn’t be touching him like that. He’s rude and clingy. Isn’t there some kind of test or something he can take? Shouldn’t he have to prove himself?”

Renato shot an amused look at the silveret, though thankfully Hayato missed it. “I’ll consider it. Good work on getting Tsuna to not ditch so often.”

Hayato shifted to puppy mode for a second, then reverted to his usual sullen look as Hisui slid the food onto the table.

“I’ll be away tomorrow,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Paint job. Shouldn’t take long. I’ll send a text if it runs over.”

Hayato looked confused, but was smart enough to keep his questions to himself. He thanked Hisui after the meal, said it tasted wonderful as always, and scampered off to his apartment.

“Where?”

“Kobe again. I really think there’s something in the water there. It just can’t be normal for that many psychos to all live in the same city. Is there anything you want me to pick up while I’m away?”

“A few cases of butterbeer would be nice.”

“Sure.”

The next morning he apparated to his usual arrival spot in Kobe and started tracking down his target. It was a crazed Rain who liked to freeze the fluids in his victims. Thankfully it was an adult, so he was not going to traumatize some poor set of parents with their son’s horrific death. Well, someone might be traumatized, but the bio showed that the guy had disowned his family several years previous.

The client wanted messy, so he shadowed the target to his apartment and forced the door to stay
open when the target headed in, then sent obsidian blades to cut straight across the guy’s torso. Blood went everywhere as he released the blades, and he added to the paint job by pulling more blood from the body and splashing it everywhere.

The door was left open, so the corpse would be found fairly quickly. He apparated back to his arrival point, sent a quick text to Daisuke, and apparated again, that time to the magical enclave to do some shopping. Cases of butterbeer went into a pouch and he picked up a handful of newspapers from around the world, as well as few other odds and ends. Back at the house he settled in on the couch with a soda to start reading through world news.

Renato arrived home and slid into the spot next to him, draping an arm around his shoulders. A kiss was planted on his cheek, then a hand gently turned his face away from the paper he was reading so his lover could give him a real kiss.

He hummed in appreciation and set the paper down. “How did today go?”

“I devised a test for Yamamoto, to satisfy Gokudera. The short version is that Yamamoto saved Tsuna from imminent death—or at least a severe maiming—and Gokudera has more or less accepted the kid as a fellow guardian.”

“And the long version?”

“Well… I started things out with testing Yamamoto on how well he dodges. Knives first, a bowgun, bullets, the usual. The kid seemed to think they were all toys.”

He brow shot up in disbelief.

“Yeah. Anyway, I got Tsuna to join in. Gokudera stood off to the side, fuming at how well the kid was doing. I invited him to assist, told him to imagine that he was going to kill Yamamoto, which perked him up. Of course, then the damn cow showed up to try to kill me again. In the end, Gokudera got a little too enthusiastic with his dynamite, the cow attacked with a missile launcher, and there was my attack at the same time—Yamamoto saved Tsuna by pulling him out of the way. Those two left trading insults with each other, so I’m sure they’ll manage to come to some kind of an accord as guardians.”

“A Storm and a Rain? Yamamoto-kun will drive Hayato-kun up the wall with his relaxed and easygoing attitude.”

Renato shrugged. “They’re young, and annoying.”

“Do you think his father will get involved?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, though. But if he does, it’ll be talking. I doubt he’s stupid enough to try to take either of us out from the shadows, not when we’ve been a part of this town for so long.”

On Sunday Tsuna came barreling into the house in a panic, almost forgetting to toe off his shoes in the entry first. “We have trouble,” he cried, pointing back toward the door. “Outside, near my house! Juice! The bird!”

Renato turned around and Tsuna freaked out on seeing that there were a number of beetles crawling over Renato’s hand. “These are my summer minions,” Renato said. “They collect information for me.” The beetles all flew away and out an open window.

“Does that mean you can talk in bug language?” Tsuna asked, his jaw hanging down unattractively.
“Bianchi is in town.”

He groaned faintly and reached for a cigarette.

“Bianchi…?” Tsuna said. “Who’s that?”

“A fellow hitman,” Renato said calmly.

Just then the doorbell went and Hisui glanced at the monitor. “Kami-sama,” he muttered. “It’s her. She found us way too quickly.”

“Go get that, will you, Tsuna?” Renato asked, innocently checking his gun and pointing the barrel straight at the boy.

“Hiiiie!” Tsuna dashed off to open the door.

The two of them ghosted into the hallway to watch as Bianchi was revealed, as beautiful as ever, wearing a visor and holding a pizza box. “Thanks for waiting,” she purred. “Here’s your delivery of Vongola pizza.”

“You—you’re that girl from earlier!”

Bianchi jerked the pizza box so the lid flipped open. “Enjoy!” she said, her voice entirely too cheerful.

Tsuna went down in stages, slowly crumpling to the floor as the miasma hit him.

Renato sighed and aimed. A second later the pizza was blown back out of range. “Chaos,” he greeted.

“Renato,” she breathed, a dusting of pink tinting her cheeks.

“What are you doing here, Bianchi?”

“I’m here to bring you back,” she said, removing the visor and tossing it over her shoulder, causing Hisui to frown at what he considered littering, never mind that his lover had just pasted a pizza over the front walk. “Let’s do another big job together! A peaceful place like this doesn’t suit you,” she said passionately. “You should be in a dark place, a dark world, where it’s dangerous and thrilling.”

“Considering that we’ve never even done a job together,” Renato said, “I’m kinda thinking you should just go back to Italy and get some more experience.”

She started to surge forward, only for Hisui to push her back with his power. “No,” he said firmly.

“Hisui,” she cried, making him twitch at the familiarity. “You shouldn’t be here, either! This quiet, boring little town is no good for you! You and Renato should be out there showing the world the power you command, making people tremble in fear at your coming!”

“Kami-sama,” he muttered. “Tsuna-kun, get up. You look stupid sprawled on the floor like that. Go into the kitchen and get a soda or something.”

Tsuna scooted away from Bianchi and got up, then fled.

He rolled his eyes slightly and said, “It’s more than a little creepy that you followed us here.”

“First it was that silly blond boy, and now this!” Bianchi flipped her hair back and pouted.
“That’s hilarious, Bianchi,” Renato said. “You’re only seventeen and you’re calling Dino a boy? Are you sure it’s not that you’re secretly interested in Dino? Maybe trying to kill him repeatedly was your way of saying, ‘I like you’?”

He heard a squeak from behind him, meaning that Tsuna had managed to sneak back out to watch without making any noise. He tucked that bit of information away for later.

“How dare you imply that!?” she said crossly. “Well—unless the tenth dies due to an accident or something, you two won’t be free again.” She let a crocodile tear roll down her face. “I’ll go for now. When the tenth is mur—I mean, when the tenth is dead, I’ll come to bring you two back again.” She waved languidly and departed.

Hisui reached out to shut the door, then returned to the kitchen, shaking his head.

“What’s up with that woman?” Tsuna demanded.

“She’s a freelance hitman known as the Poison Scorpion,” Renato said, taking a seat. “Her special skill is to feed people her Poison Cooking.”

“Another weirdo is here! What is wrong with your world!?” Tsuna slumped into a chair and went to have a sip of his soda, but he paused long enough to take a sniff first before daring to drink any. “She seems to like you two a lot.”

“We are good,” Renato said smugly.

“Can’t you do something? That’s the second time she’s tried to kill me already!”

Renato shrugged and lit up, taking a drag and exhaling the smoke at Tsuna. “All humans are creatures who will one day die,” he said callously. “You should think of it as training, kitten. How to dodge, for one. How to check for poisons, for another. She’ll just keep trying.”

Tsuna grabbed his soda and left, tears of despair streaming down his face.

“I’ll take duty tomorrow,” he said. “We both know how tenacious she is when given the opportunity.”

Renato nodded. “You obviously didn’t key her out of the warding.”

“No, but I should have as soon as we returned here. I just wasn’t thinking. I’ll take care of it after dinner. It won’t necessarily keep her out, but it will force her out if her intentions take a wrong turn.”

“And Nana’s house?”

“Yeah, no.”

“Wait, what?” Renato looked oddly confused by the refusal.

“The warding there is all geared toward keeping Nana-chan safe, so tinkering with the schemata to handle Bianchi specifically isn’t necessary. I’m positive Bianchi-chan would never hurt Nana-chan. She’s after—shit. Hayato-kun.” He fetched out his phone and sent a quick text to warn the kid. “I’ll make sure Hayato-kun’s warding is updated, though, because his apartment should be his haven.”

The next morning he went off to shadow Tsuna, tying the usual listening charm to his earpiece. Maybe he could come up with some kind of jewelry the kitten could wear that was already tied in? Preferably something he could not remove? They didn’t need to listen, but it was useful.
Bianchi tried to kill Tsuna on his way to school that morning, which would have made Kyoko a civilian casualty. Perhaps he should have a little accident and give Bianchi an inadvertent haircut. He spent the better part of the morning bored out of his mind, but then came the results of that day’s Home Economics class, where the girls (and why not the boys?) had made onigiri.

The girls all paraded in holding lacquered trays with their efforts proudly presented, ready to share them with their male counterparts. He could see, through the sight on his sniper rifle, that Bianchi had slipped into the room with her own offering, and did a masterful bit of slight of hand to switch hers with Kyoko’s. Hisui was impressed that Tsuna actually noticed and was panicking over how to respond. He wanted to appreciate Kyoko’s efforts, but did not want to die due to Bianchi’s interference.

Hayato and Yamamoto crowded in and reached out to each take one, since Tsuna was frozen in place, and brought them to their mouths. Tsuna exploded with flailing hands, knocking the onigiri away from his two friends. Hisui nodded and fired, nailing Tsuna in the forehead with a Dying Will Bullet, then followed up with one to his stomach. It turned the kitten into a ravenous beast who ate every bit of food available to him, but that was fine. The other students were already convinced that Dame-Tsuna was also Baka-Tsuna and Hentai-Tsuna; more weirdness would be hand-waved away.

He reported his fun day to Renato once he got home, and his lover added it to the weekly report he was building. “Bianchi-chan almost nailed Kyoko-chan, though. Since it’s doubtful she’ll leave of her own volition, how about we give her a job to do?”

Renato got a curious cast to his expression. “I’m not paying for that shit.”

He sighed. “Ren.”

His lover looked at him sharply. “Right. If we can get her interested, she could help provide protection for the area, I guess. But how? What…” He trailed off and started muttering to himself. “We lie,” he said, “lie like dogs.”

His brow went up.

“We are pathetic when it comes to dealing with things like music and fine arts, right? Of course we are. But those are part of the curriculum. So we ask Bianchi to tutor the kitten in those every so often. If she gets at all invested in the place she’ll calm down and only target actual threats. We would be … entrusting her … with this responsibility.”

Hisui snorted. “We may as well try. And if it doesn’t work, well, Tsuna-kun will have to develop an iron stomach, immunity to poison, and good dodging skills.”

That weekend they were waiting in Tsuna’s room for him to come home. What he was doing and who he was doing it with was unimportant. Him being home so they could torture him was important. Tsuna came thudding up the stairs and burst into his room, only to stop dead at the sight of them and squeak. He dropped what he was carrying and fled back down the stairs, into the kitchen, shrieked, and thumped back up into his room.

“Hiieee!” Tsuna pointed back through the door. “She’s in my house! My house!”

Renato smiled. “Such observational skills!”

A look of sheer disbelief dragged down Tsuna’s expression, which was better than the fear he had been wearing.

“Bianchi-chan has agreed to help tutor you, kitten,” he said tonelessly.
“What!?”

“That’s right,” came Bianchi’s voice. “These two fine men realized what an asset I could be and asked for my help. It’s not dangerous—unfortunately—but there are classes you’re responsible for work in that neither of them are very good at. I know! I didn’t believe it at first, either, but I suppose everyone has weak points.”

Tsuna sank to the ground in a daze.

“So, kitten—”

“No, kitten—” Tsuna whined.

“I’ll be making a little time here and there to help you out with music appreciation and fine arts classes. I’d help with home economics, but Hisui is a fabulous cook in his own right, just like Mama is. Still, I might be willing to give Mama a hand from time to time.”

Tsuna squeaked like a leaky tire releasing air, then jumped up, ducked past Bianchi, and fled down the stairs when the doorbell chimed. “Gokudera-kun, what’s up?” drifted up the stairs.

“Would you like some watermelon? It’s supposed to be really sweet.”

…I’m very thankful, but right now I’m in the middle of something, so…”

“Some kinda trouble?” Hayato asked darkly. “If you want, I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Eh?”

Bianchi’s head had snapped up on hearing the name of the visitor, but paused. Her eyes went watery on hearing her brother’s voice. She turned slowly and walked toward the stairs.

“Actually,” Tsuna said, “now we have…”

There was a loud thunk, which prompted Hisui to actually get up to go see what was happening. Hayato was just standing there, his eyes wide and his complexion tinted green. “My sister!?”

“Hayato,” she breathed.

Gokudera’s stomach made the most appalling sound. He hunched over in pain, then fled, abandoning his watermelon.

“He’s always like that,” Bianchi commented, then sighed. “So strange.”

“They’re siblings?” Tsuna muttered.

“Good to see your comprehension skills aren’t completely useless,” Renato said.

Tsuna scowled and took off after his friend.

“Well,” Renato said, “maybe this will end up in a little heart to heart for those two.”

An hour later Tsuna came back, hastily toed off his shoes, and rushed upstairs. Hisui eyed the stairs briefly and went back to speaking with Nana, asking her how her attempts at Italian cooking were coming along.

Five minutes after that Tsuna came into the kitchen and focused on Renato. “Will you—will you do
Renato’s brow went up slowly. “You can barely manage to focus on your homework, kitten. Why on Earth would I do any favors for you?”

Tsuna sagged.

“Tsukun?” Nana said, a vague frown on her face. “Are you not taking full advantage of the help Hisui-kun and Ren-kun are giving you?”

Renato got up and laid a “friendly” arm around Tsuna’s shoulders. “Let’s go outside and talk, kitten.”

“Oh, I have to see this,” he muttered, and got up to follow.

“So what exactly is this favor you want?” Renato asked once they were safely away from Nana.

“Can you beat up Lambo-kun a little?” Tsuna asked hopefully.

“The hell?” he muttered.

“Gokudera-kun came up with this plan,” Tsuna explained, “and showed me a picture of Bianchi-san’s old boyfriend—he looks exactly like Lambo-kun when he’s switched out with the Ten Year Bazooka! So if you beat him up a little, he’d use it, and then Bianchi-san would chase after him…”

Renato’s expression went from amused to cold. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’re asking me to beat up a five year old child.”

“But you’ve attacked him before!” Tsuna protested, looking confused.

“Dios mio,” Renato muttered. “I defended myself. There’s a difference. If the little cow brat gets hurt because of his own actions, that’s not on me. How about you go beat up on a five year old and see how well you sleep at night?”

Tsuna slowly got a horrified look of realization on his face. That was when Lambo decided to join the party, his attempt at evil laughter coming out more like the asthmatic braying of a donkey. “Lambo-san is going to be brave and jump from up here! Die, Reborn!” he cried as he leaped. “With the stun-gun he got from the boss, zap away!”

Hisui pinched the bridge of his nose, then reached out to cushion the little cow’s fall. His actions did not prevent the little guy from accidentally electrocuting himself, nor bursting into tears once he was on the ground. The bazooka came out and Lambo shot himself in the face. When the smoke cleared a confused, fifteen year old Lambo was sitting there.

He eyed Tsuna, who looked at Lambo, then the house, then Lambo, and then looked up at the sky as though it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. Hisui exchanged a look with Renato, one of well-hidden surprise, then walked over to Lambo and crouched down. “You might want to make yourself scarce,” he said quietly. “There’s a woman inside who will likely try to kill you if she comes out and sees you.”

Lambo got a frightened look on his face. “Bianchi is here?” he whispered.

He nodded.

Lambo jumped up and fled, so Hisui got up and eyed Tsuna again.
“All right, kitten, good choice. Now, let’s go do some homework,” Renato said, slinging an arm around Tsuna again and leading him back into the house.

Several days later Hisui was making sure Tsuna got to school on time. They were interrupted by a girl mincing up with a dreamy look on her face. “Hello!”

He nodded, since she was looking at him.

“My name … is Miura Haru,” she said, blushing, her hands coming up to clasp under her chin. She was drooling just a tiny bit.

Hisui cursed the fact—for just a tiny, tiny moment—that magical people aged much more slowly, and that his looks were so … pretty. “I see,” he said slowly, glancing toward the house he had witnessed her emerging from.

That made her blush harder for some reason. “Will you be … my friend?”

Beside him, in his peripheral vision, he could see Tsuna’s jaw drop. “Miura-san, you seem to be under the mistaken impression that I’m your age.”

“What? But—”

“Tsuna-kun, we need to get going if you’re to get to school on time,” he said, giving the boy a nudge. “It was nice meeting you, Miura-san.” He and Tsuna continued on, but he could feel her skulking along behind them.

They got all of a block before she dashed up and shrieked, “You’re a bastard! Your horrible loser influence has infected this poor boy so badly he didn’t even introduce himself!”

“Hiiiie,” Tsuna quietly squeaked.

“Just look at him!” she said, darting around in front of them and grabbing Tsuna by the shirt. “He’s obviously pure-hearted while yours is just rotten!”

Hisui was torn between laughing and interfering, and had to press a finger to his lips briefly.

“We’re obviously having a misunderstanding here,” Tsuna choked out.

“What misunderstanding!?” she demanded. “It’s all very obvious.”

“Miura-san,” he said.

Her head whipped around to look at him, the blush coming back. “Yes?” she breathed.

“Please refrain from manhandling my student.”

“Student?” She blinked at him.

“Yes. Student. I went to school with his mother.”

She released Tsuna with a gasp and backed up, then fled.

“Words fail me,” he said, then straightened Tsuna’s shirt and nudged him forward. “That was like one of those cliché manga stories. Huh. Maybe you two are destined to be together.”

“Hiiiie! What are you saying!? I like—I—” Tsuna pressed his lips together and frowned.
They made it to school without further incident, and Tsuna was able to get to homeroom on time. He stuck around disillusioned, listening with half his attention and taking the occasional look through binoculars, but mostly just reading a book while perched in a tree. It was a quiet day and a quiet afternoon. He stayed with Tsuna until shortly before dinner, going over his homework with him and trying to get the boy to think rather than automatically assume he couldn’t do any of it. All it took was a slight scowl and Tsuna would scramble to try again. Who knew being so unintentionally intimidating to the kitten from a young age would come in handy down the road?

Renato took over the next day. When he got home he took one look at Hisui and started laughing.

“What?”

“Oh, tesoro. That girl you ran into yesterday? She’s cracked. She’s got so many screws loose I don’t know how she doesn’t fall apart into tiny little pieces,” Renato said, sliding into a seat.

He sighed. “What happened?”

“She decided that you are, ah, not right in the head—” Renato paused to snicker madly. “—and that Tsuna was taking advantage of you and filling your head with nonsense to make himself feel better. You know, because he’s such a loser, and he wanted someone to feel superior to.”

“Not right in the head?” he parroted in disbelief.

Renato nodded. “She can’t believe you’re as old as you are, for one thing. Anyway, she caught up with Tsuna on the bridge, wearing armor, carrying a motorcycle helmet, and wielding a hockey stick. She challenged him. Gokudera happened to walk by, saw what was happening, and rushed to the rescue.”

His head dropped in resignation. “He didn’t realize…”

“Oh huh. Dynamite city. She ended up in the river, drowning.”

“You shot him, he jumped over the side, and saved her.”

“And now she’s decided she’s in love with the kitten. It was hilarious. That boy gets into way too much damn trouble. Unfortunately—for Tsuna, anyway—his grades have been so bad he’ll have to attend summer school, even with all the time we’ve been putting into getting him working.”

“Which means we won’t have that all that extra time to start running him into the ground.”

Renato nodded, then snickered again and shook his head. “Maybe that girl will be good for Tsuna. He needs people around him to keep challenging him, pushing him.”

“We can hope. Let’s go for sushi tonight,” he suggested.

That netted him a look of banked curiosity, and a nod. At Takesushi they sat at the counter and ordered. Yamamoto treated them just like any other customers, though there was an edge to his gaze, like the razor-sharpness of his blade. “How are things?” Yamamoto asked conversationally.

“Fine,” Renato said, accepting a lacquered tray and setting it before him. “Your boy seems to be getting along well with our student.”

“…Yes, he keeps telling me about this game.”

Hisui eyed the man blankly. Tsuyoshi had not been in town when he and Nana were kids. He had
moved there not long before Hisui moved back from Kyoto post-graduation, after his wife had died, but he had to have picked up on the gossip. There was also that little detail of Tsuyoshi having retired from the mafia. Why he had picked Namimori was beyond comprehension, but then, it was not as though he had ever bothered to ask. Perhaps he had wanted a quiet little place to raise his son and start a business in.

“There’s games, and there’s games,” Renato replied, then lightly coated the fish side of a piece of sushi with soy sauce and popped it into his mouth.

“Maybe I should teach my boy a few things.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” he said. “There are some things only a parent can pass on.” Sadly, Iemitsu was not that parent for Tsuna, and Nana was so far out of the ball park. She was too indulgent, possibly as a response to Iemitsu rarely if ever being home after Tsuna got to a certain age. And when he did show up he acted like a lazy bastard, wandering the house in his underthings, drinking too much, eating too much, and unintentionally terrorizing the kitten with his fearless and boisterous behavior. It was as though the man expected his son to be a carbon copy of himself, and refused to see anything to the contrary, despite calling the poor boy things like his “little tuna-fish”.

‘Yeah, let’s not give the kid a complex or anything,’ he thought, accepting his own tray of sushi and preparing to eat. Tsuyoshi was a master at making the stuff and it deserved to be eaten with respect. Not, as he had once witnessed Iemitsu do, gleefully eat fatty tuna while grinning at his “little tuna-fish”.

If Iemitsu decided to visit they would probably have to do some damage control. It was … unfortunate … that the man was the External Advisor. He had to wonder if Tsuna would retire his father after he stepped in officially as Vongola Jūdaime and choose someone else, someone he could actually work with and trust. Iemitsu had more than likely irreparably damaged his relationship with his son with his efforts to keep them protected.

He shook his head and tried to focus on the food.

They went over to the Sawada house at the weekend to have breakfast with Nana and the rest of the household. He was eating sōmen when Lambo came thudding down the stairs, laughing that “evil” laugh of his. Lambo appeared in the doorway with his horns askew, saying, “Lambo-san is here!”

Tsuna sighed. “At least put your horns on straight,” he said wearily.

Lambo’s eyes went wide and his cheeks dusted pink with embarrassment. “It was intentional,” he claimed, “but Lambo-san will fix it anyway.” He reached up to pull the misplaced horn out of his hair and stick it into its proper place at the side of his head. His eyes went all watery, then he scowled. “It really was intentional! Die, Reborn!” he cried, producing a normal bazooka and firing.

Renato caught the missile with his hashi and flipped it back, propelling it and Lambo away.

Hisui eyed the ceiling as his lover distracted the others, then fixed the hole with some magic. An hour or so later, when they were outside smoking, Lambo came back, with a boy about Tsuna’s age who looked to be the nervous type. Or perhaps it was Lambo himself causing that reaction. The boy had Lambo on his shoulder and a wooden case in his hands, but that was quickly forgotten when the cow brat tried to kill Renato again, twice.

Tsuna and Bianchi came out of the house to see what the commotion was about, just about the time that Lambo burst into tears and shot himself with the Ten Year Bazooka. Fifteen year old Lambo had obviously been in the middle of a meal given the hashi he was holding. “Hello, young Vongola
Jūdaime,” he said, then noticed Bianchi and went white. “Goodness. I think I’ll excuse myself.”

Bianchi stared back.

“It’s okay,” Tsuna said. “I explained everything to Bianchi-san.” He turned to her with a nervous smile. “See? After ten years, Lambo-kun turns into this. You get it, right? …Bianchi-san?”

“So you were alive. Romeo…” Her expression hardened.

“No!” Tsuna shouted. “Run, Lambo-kun!”

Lambo fled, Bianchi hot on his heels, a platter of Poison Cooking appearing in her hand. “I’ll kill you!” she snarled. Then she pulled out a gun and aimed, and started firing.

“Don’t worry,” he said to Tsuna, who was wobbling alarmingly. “She has horrible aim. See? One just flew right past you and she’s not even facing this way.”

Tsuna did a little dance that might be mistaken for a child’s way of saying “I desperately need the bathroom” and squeaked. “You have to do something,” he cried. “Someone could get killed!”

Renato produced his gun and aimed. “How about you do something, kitten?” He fired, nailing Tsuna in the forehead. The boy went flying and landed on the stranger’s back, then popped back up with a cry of, “Reborn! I will stop the fight with my Dying Will!”

“The secret to stopping battles is to make people lose their will to fight,” Renato said calmly, and fired twice. “Shoot both cheeks and you get—”

Hisui pressed a finger against his mouth to prevent the forming smile from appearing. Tsuna’s face had puffed up like some horrific allergic reaction—or that of a chipmunk on a nut gathering binge.

“—the stare down effect,” Renato finished.

The stranger took one look and fell over in a dead faint. Bianchi came back into view, a platter of food still in her hand, and stared at Tsuna. She hummed curiously, then slammed the food into Tsuna’s face. “You piss me off,” she said, then wandered into the house.

“Looks like it doesn’t work on Bianchi-chan. Huh.”

Things were quiet for most of August. They spent a lot of time working with Tsuna due to him having to attend summer classes, being firm about the need for him to give more focus and attention to his work. The kitten was getting better slowly. Half-day classes meant they had that much more time to devote to getting the boy up to speed and getting him used to just doing the work instead of blowing it off for more pleasurable activities such as video games.

His (official) birthday was revealed to the Sawada household when Nana made a fuss and insisted on cooking a special meal for him, of all his favorites. Lambo was actually well-behaved for once, but that might have had something to do with the amount of sweets on hand.

When they rolled into September Tsuna managed to delay enough that he was going to be late for the opening ceremony that started the second term of the year. Hisui simply used it as an opportunity to nail the kitten with another Dying Will Bullet, then shadowed him to school. Along the way Kyoko’s brother tried to speak with him, reaching out to grasp Tsuna’s wrist, and was pulled along.
"Your power and stamina are much better than what I’ve heard," Sasagawa said admiringly once Tsuna sputtered to a stop at the school entrance. "You have passion, too! You’re definitely a talented guy who can be found only once in a hundred years! Sawada Tsuna-san, join our club!” he entreated.

"Hiie? How—how do you know my name?" Tsuna asked.

"I heard about you from my younger sister," Sasagawa replied.

"Onii-chan!” came a familiar female voice. He glanced that way to see Kyoko rushing toward them, a bag cradled in her arms. "You dropped your bag on the street!” She made it to them and handed the bag over, then blinked and said, “Oh, good morning, Tsuna-kun. Why are you two together?” She glanced back and forth between them. “Onii-chan, don’t tell me that you grabbed Tsuna-kun and gave him some trouble!”

“I did not!” Sasagawa said strongly.

Hisui edged closer and shoved some clothes into Tsuna’s hands while the kid was freaking out. Why it was such a surprise that Kyoko had a brother…?

“Tsuna-kun,” Kyoko said, “you can just ignore my brother’s babbling about boxing, okay?”

“Boxing?” Tsuna muttered as he shoved his legs into trousers.

“Oh, I haven’t introduced myself yet,” Sasagawa said, then shouted, “I’m the captain of the boxing club, Sasagawa Ryohei! My motto is ‘extreme’!”

Tsuna poked a bewildered face out of the shirt he was putting on.

“I welcome you to the club, Sawada Tsuna-san,” Ryohei said, planting a solid and friendly hand on the kitten’s shoulder.

“Don’t force him into your club, Onii-chan,” Kyoko said firmly.

“I’m not forcing! Right, Sawada-san?”

Hisui mostly stopped paying attention at that point and wandered off to settle in to spy, letting Renato know about the development.

“It’s about time he ran into the kid,” his lover replied. “This could be an opportunity. I’ve spent time already with Ryohei in disguise so…”

“You might want to come to the gym after classes let out, then. Kyoko-chan seems to have inadvertently persuaded the kitten to at least go talk to her brother, even if we both know the last thing on his mind is joining a club.”

“All right. I’ll be there.”

After classes he shadowed the kid to the gym and saw that Renato was already there, in his disguise as Master Paopao. Tsuna, of course, saw right through it, but Ryohei was not that gifted. What Tsuna did not understand was that he most likely had the Vongola intuition, known to crop up in their Skies.

“Oh, Sawada-san,” Ryohei said happily, “I’ve been waiting for you! Upon hearing your reputation, the elder of Muay Thai came all the way from Thailand!”
‘In less than a day?’ he thought, laughing silently in a shadowed corner.

“This is Master Paopao!” Ryohei said, gesturing toward Renato.

“I want to see a match between the captain and the new member,” Renato chirped.

“What!? What are you saying? You want me to do boxing?”

“Oh obviously,” Renato said mockingly.

Before he knew it, Tsuna was geared up and in the ring, with Ryohei ready to fight. “Let’s go, Sawada Tsuna-san! No need to hold back on your strength!”

Kyoko, Hayato, and Takeshi had arrived to watch and were cheering in the background.

Ryohei danced forward and wailed Tsuna in the face, knocking him flat. “Don’t be careless, Sawada-san,” he remonstrated.

Tsuna sent a desperate look at Renato, shaking his head violently. Renato smirked and re-aimed, and shot Ryohei instead, who collapsed on top of Tsuna. “It’ll be fair if both of you are shot, right?”

Just then Ryohei got up and stared down. “What’s wrong, Sawada-san? Can you stand up? If you can stand up, we’ll continue!”

Tsuna’s face morphed through shock to bewilderment to thoughtfulness.

“Sasagawa Ryohei,” Renato said quietly. “An impressive one. Next up is you, Tsuna.” Renato’s gun flashed up and fired.

“Reborn!”

‘Why does he keep saying that?’ he wondered. ‘No one else does it. The kid thinks too damn much about all the wrong things.’

“With my Dying Will, I will reject the offer to enter the boxing club!” Tsuna proclaimed.

“Oh? I won’t inquire why,” Ryohei said, “since I believe we can communicate with our fists. Enter the club, Sawada-san!”

“No!” What followed was a high-speed dance recital, only ended when one of Tsuna’s refusals actually resulted in him lashing out to nail Ryohei and knock him out of the ring.

There was a deep silence, and then Ryohei sat up from where he crashed and said, “I like you even more! Your boxing skills are platinum! I’ll definitely welcome you in!”

“You look so happy, Onii-chan,” Kyoko commented.

Tsuna got a look of confused despair on his face, then sank to the ground when Renato said, “Want to join the family?”

On Wednesday Renato came home with a friend in tow.

“Shamal?” he said as they entered the living room. “When did you get into town? And why this town?”

“Oh, well… I ran into a little difficulty,” Shamal said, slumping into a chair. “If I’d known, well… I
wouldn’t have made those moves on the Queen. Then at least I wouldn’t be internationally wanted for cheating on 2,082 women simultaneously.”

“Kami-sama,” he muttered. “You want something to drink?” Dealing with a womanizer was no reason not to be polite.

“Got any beer?”

He sighed and went to fetch one, and coffee for Renato. For himself he got his usual soft drink.

“As for why here, well, why not here? I figured since I was in the country I’d come visit.”

“So you’re hiding.”

“About that…” Renato said.

“Yes, he can stay, but only if he agrees to owe us a favor.”

Shamal looked at him sharply, suspiciously, but eventually nodded. He knew what kind of cooking he’d be enjoying if he stayed.

Tsuna came down sick on Friday. They were walking the kid to school to ensure he got there on time and that no one bullied him along the way—always a possibility—when the kitten suddenly raised a hand to wipe at his brow.

“I feel really weak,” he said quietly. “Maybe I caught a cold?” As he brought his hand down he saw something that made him squeak in fear. “What is this!”?

“You’ve contracted a fatal disease called Skullitis,” Renato said callously. “You’re going to die.”

Tsuna sank to his knees, staring at his palm.

“Do you know how many Dying Will Bullets you’ve been shot in the head with?”

“Wha—I don’t know… How many?”

“Exactly ten. It’s said that when you’ve been killed that many times with a Dying Will Bullet, it’s possible for something horrible to happen to the victim. Who would have known it would be an incurable disease? Too bad.”

“Why didn’t you say something before all this?” Tsuna asked. “If I’d known…” He sighed and got up, then began walking away from the school. “I’m going home, then.”

“You’re handling this better than expected,” he commented.

“Who would believe such a silly story?” Tsuna said crankily. “You guys probably snuck a temporary tattoo on my hand. It’ll wash off easily enough.”

When they got the house Nana was out, probably shopping, and Tsuna went to the sink to take care of the alleged prank. He turned on the tap and glanced down at his hand, and freaked out again.

“What the hell!? It’s talking!”

He sidled over quickly to take a look. “I’ve never gotten a one hundred on a test,” he read. “Ah, yes. Skullitis is an interesting disease,” he informed their student. “Those skulls will keep multiplying and writing out your secrets, right up until you die.”
“It’s also known as the ‘embarrassing yourself before death’ disease,” Renato added helpfully.

Tsuna furiously pumped the soap container and started scrubbing his hand, then shrieked loudly. “It’s multiplying! And this—”

“It’s an embarrassing secret only you know, right?” Renato said.

“So that means this is seriously a disease!?” Tsuna was so pale the marks stood out in stark relief.

He moved off out of Tsuna’s direct line of sight and sent a text to Shamal, asking him to come over immediately for a case of Skullitis, as he was calling in that favor.

“Oh, hey, the kitten is finally paying attention,” Renato said mockingly. “By the way, Skullitis will kill you in an hour from the first time you feel the disease. So you have…?” He glanced at the clock. “Thirty minutes to live.”

“Nooo! I can’t die! I’m too young to die!” Tsuna wailed, swaying back and forth.

“You’ve already died ten times, kitten,” Renato said. “What’s once more?”

Tsuna went still, then wailed again. “Help me! I don’t want to die with my shame written all over my body!”

“No can do, kitten. Actually, wait,” Renato said, looking for all the world as if something had only just then occurred to him. “You think—?” he asked Hisui.

“He does owe us a favor,” he murmured.


“We know of a doctor who’s really good at handling incurable diseases. If I call him over, he might be able to do something.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier!? Hurry up and call him!” Tsuna demanded.

Renato hummed thoughtfully. “With that kind of an attitude out of you, I don’t think I’m in the mood to.”

Tsuna hit the floor in an obsequious pose. “Renato-sama! Please call that doctor over!”

Renato scratched his jaw, a dubious expression on his face. “Will you score within the top ten on your next test if you’re saved?” When Tsuna took too long to respond—probably because he was swearing in his head—Renato added, “If you don’t want to live…”

“I do, I do! I will, I will, I will! I definitely will!”

Right about then they heard a man grunting in pain outside. Tsuna rushed out, not even bothering to dry off his hands.

Bianchi had arrived, as had Shamal, and he was down for the count with a plate of poison cooking on his face. Though, Hisui could see, he had managed to shield himself somewhat with a handkerchief.

“It’s been a while since I killed someone for the good of the world,” Bianchi commented, hands on her hips.
“You!” Tsuna pointed at her rudely. “Don’t kill people at my house!”

“Such a tomboy as usual,” Shamal said, reaching up to flip the mess away and get up. “Girls should be like that. Now I like you even more,” he declared, darting over to smooch her on the cheek.

Bianchi twisted and nailed him in the face with her boot, knocking him half way down the walk.

“What—who? Who is that guy?” Tsuna said.

“Oh, that’s the doctor we were talking about,” Renato said. “Dr Shamal.”

Shamal popped back up and made for Bianchi. “No need to be embarrassed, Bianchi. How about a kiss?”

She nailed him with a roundhouse kick. ‘Go away!’ she yelled.

“That’s … a doctor?” Tsuna asked, pointing limply at the body. “A guy like him can really cure me?”

“What is it with you and comprehension, kitten?” Renato complained. “How many times do we have to repeat stuff before it sinks in?” To a just standing Shamal he said, “Yo, Shamal. This is Tsuna. He’s infected with Skullitis.”

“Oh, right,” Shamal said, reaching up to cradle his head. “You called me over because of that. It’s a shame, really, but you know I don’t treat guys. He’s just gonna have to die. He’s a bit young, but you know, that kind of thing happens daily.”

Tsuna went into full freak-out mode, even going so far as to latch onto Shamal from behind and begin pleading with him for help. Bianchi snickered madly at Tsuna’s predicament, Shamal kept trying to fend him off, and Kyoko showed up to warn Tsuna about her brother’s continuing efforts to induct him into the boxing club.

Shamal took one look at the girl and immediately started trying to kiss her, which actually sent Tsuna into Dying Will Mode without being shot. He and Renato exchanged a surprised look as Tsuna’s clothing dissolved, but the kid did not act as they expected him to. He just sat down on the spot and moped, his Dying Will Flame sputtering out almost immediately.

After a sharp look from Hisui, Shamal finally brought out a case filled with capsules and said, “Fine, fine, I’ll cure you. Just stay still. The opposite of Skullitis is Angelitis.” He ran his fingers over the capsules and pulled one out, then flicked it. It split apart in the air and released its cargo.

“A mosquito?” Tsuna asked.

“Shamal is a doctor,” Renato lectured, “but he’s also a freelance assassin called Trident Shamal. His skill is to control mosquitoes called ‘Trident Mosquitoes’ that carry incurable diseases to kill enemies, six hundred sixty-six of them, one for each of the diseases Shamal himself is infected with.”

“Go for it, Angela!” Shamal said. The mosquito landed on Tsuna’s arm and bit him, and slowly the skull markings and text bubbles faded away.

“Thank you so much!” Tsuna said, looking elated. “But what made you change your mind?”

Shamal looked a bit shifty for a second, his eyes darting toward Hisui, then he said, “Well, when I read one of the secrets on your back—I started to pity you. I mean, it’s so pathetic that you’d never talked to a girl before you met Kyoko-chan. You’ve probably never even kissed a girl! I couldn’t let
“I know that look,” he said. “What happened today?” Maybe he should get on with that enchanted item idea for the kitten so he could listen in on his days off. On the other hand, the look on his lover’s face as he prepared to speak told him Renato enjoyed being able to have story time.

“Oh, I was spying on Hibari, that Cloud. He’s really good for a kid his age. I still think it’s weird that he chose to stay at Nami Middle instead of moving up to high school, but… Anyway, I decided to have some fun. I told Tsuna, Hayato, and Takeshi that we’d make a hideout for the famiglia at the school. Takeshi, of course, still thinks it’s all a game, but he was very enthusiastic about the idea.”

“Let me guess. Hayato flipped, then went into puppy mode.”

Renato nodded. “I suggested the reception room, because it’s almost never used, but neglected to mention the part about how Hibari had claimed it. So we all got up there and the boys walked in, and Hibari confronted them, wanted to know why they were there. Hayato didn’t know who he was, but he sure got pissed off when Hibari censured him for smoking and smacked the cigarette right out of his mouth.

“Tsuna got wailed in the face with a tonfa, the other two went to his defense, got downed, then Tsuna shook off the pain and looked around, started freaking out. So I shot him. Long story short, I ended the fight before it got too crazy—Hibari had just asked if he could kill Tsuna, after all—and Hibari went after me instead. Apparently I’m ‘amazing’.”

He smiled. “You are.”

Renato grinned. “Well, Hibari tried to lay a hand on me, so I exploded a bomb in his face and got the kids out of there, then lectured them about battles. I think it worked out well. Hibari is intrigued now, and he knows that Tsuna is not quite the herbivore he thought.”

“I invited a few people over for tomorrow.”

“Oh? Oh, right. Hayato’s birthday. You going to cook up an Italian spread?”

“Of course. Do you have any preferences?”

“Chicken scallopini, ossobuco, spinach cheese manicotti, lasagne, baked ziti—”

“All right,” he cut in. “I’ll make a number of dishes and we can all sample.”

Renato grinned and nodded.

By the time Hayato showed up everyone else had already arrived—Shamal, Tsuna, Nana, Takeshi, Ryohei, Kyoko, Haru, Bianchi (wearing a set of tinted glasses she promised not to remove and that Hisui had ensured would stay on for the duration), and Lambo. Why they were including the girls he was not entirely sure, but he did not mind feeding extra people. And maybe Haru would finally figure out how old he really was.

Hisui had set up a sideboard just covered in food and had a stack of plates, a collection of cutlery, and plenty of napkins waiting. The second Lambo came in the door Hisui hauled the kid off and sat him down for a talk. “Lambo-kun, if you cause any trouble tonight, I will make you regret stepping foot in this house. If you attempt to kill Renato tonight, I will make you regret ever coming to Japan.”
The kid laughed that obnoxious laugh, so he lifted the kid up with his power and plastered him against the wall.

“Laugh all you want, chibi, but I’m not joking. This is my house, not Mama’s, so you follow my rules. If you behave yourself we’ll get along just fine. This is supposed to be a party, a happy event. If you cause trouble, I may just have to break your damn legs.”

The colour drained from Lambo’s face and his eyes went all teary. He could tell the child wanted to get out the Ten Year Bazooka and use it, but Hisui’s power prevented it. “If you intend to keep on with being a hitman, you need to learn control. I can help with that, if you want it. But you have to behave yourself. Blindly attacking gets you nowhere, and all it does is make people laugh at you. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you?”

Lambo sniffled and nodded.

“Will you behave tonight? Or do I have to boot you out of the house?”

“Lambo-san … will behave.”

He nodded after a moment and slowly brought the kid back down and into his arms, then got out a tissue and wiped Lambo’s nose. “I made sure there’s a little takoyaki for you, and I have some grapes for after. I know you like those. But there’s plenty of other food, too. So, shall we go join the party?”

Lambo aimed a set of wide green eyes at him and nodded again.

“All right. Let’s go have some … safe … fun.” He brought the child back into where the others were, personally prepared a plate for the kid, and set him up at the table, then patted him on the head before going off to get his own food. He realized a little while later that he had developed a shadow. Lambo was following him everywhere, and eventually latched onto his leg.

He looked down to see the kid staring up at him adoringly and sighed faintly, then detached him and picked him up. “What’s up, chibi?”

Lambo just stared at him adoringly some more. Renato was having silent hysterics on the other side of the room, and Shamal was giving him a funny look. Nana, on the other hand, had her hands up under her chin and was cooing.

He nodded to himself and carried Lambo off to the kitchen long enough to get some grapes for him, who accepted them with a little giggle and started savoring them one by one. He kept the child with him for the remainder of the party, even made sure he used the damn bathroom, but Lambo went to Nana willingly enough once things wound down.

After the guests had departed for the evening Renato laughed. “Dios mio, you had that cow brat eating out of your hand! What did you do to him?”

“I threatened to break his legs.”

Shamal gawked. “Cold!”

He shook his head. “I told him flat out that he had to behave himself, that I would make him regret causing any trouble while he was here. I may or may not have lectured him a tiny bit. The last thing I wanted for was this to devolve into a damn free-for-all with civilians in the room.”

“And that, somehow, made the kid adore you,” Renato said, shaking his head.
He shrugged. “I laid down the rules of being in this house. No causing trouble, no trying to assassinate Ren-kun.”

Renato smiled, then paused. “But nothing about outside the house?”

He thought back and shook his head. “I can’t take away all your daily excitement. It helps keep you on your toes.”

“Tesoro!”

“The kid hates being ignored,” he pointed out. “Even if he wasn’t trying to kill you he would probably still be an obnoxious little cow brat around you, simply because you refuse to even look at him normally.”

“Damn Lightnings,” Renato muttered. “If this works out like I think it will, you get to figure out how to train the kid.”

“Of course. But I know you can take care of yourself, so dealing with the kid’s attacks shouldn’t ever be a problem. And maybe, just maybe, he’ll learn something. Personally, I think the Bovino boss is a fucking moron, telling a five year old that he has to assassinate you before he’s considered in the running to be the boss at some point. Was he trying to get the kid killed?”

Renato started to say something, paused, and leaned back against the wall. “The kid’s weaponry is mostly kiddie class. Do you think maybe his boss sent him here as part of some convoluted training exercise?”

“You’re known for being dispassionate and merciless, but I don’t think most people would assume you’d whack a small child for real.”

“Maybe if it’d been Bel,” Renato muttered.

He sighed. “Crazed psychopaths aside…”

“No, you’re right. I suppose I could go a little easier on the brat.”

“Whatever. Time to clean up.”

The next day Renato went off to shadow Tsuna after their usual breakfast, and Hisui was doing the dishes when the doorbell chimed. He glanced at the monitor and blinked stupidly at seeing no one out there. It rang again a minute later, and that time he went to investigate. On opening the door he still saw no one, but then his leg was latched onto. “Lambo-san is here,” came the child’s muffled voice.

He reached down to detach the child and lift him up, then carried Lambo inside and closed the door. “What are you doing here so early, chibi?”

“Lambo-san wanted to see the nice man again.”

‘Nice? I threatened bodily harm.’ “I see,” he said and brought the child to the kitchen, grabbing a few thick books on the way. He placed those on a seat as a booster and parked the kid, then went to get some of the grapes that had not been consumed the night previous. After sliding a small bowl of them in front of Lambo he took a seat for himself. “What would you like to talk about?”

“Nagao-san will listen?” Lambo looked shocked. He chose a grape from the bowl and stuffed it into his mouth.
“Sure. Why don’t you tell me about how you got to Japan?”

“Lambo-san is very good at hiding and stowed away on a plane.”

“I don’t imagine that was very comfortable.”

Lambo shook his head and stuffed another grape in his mouth, then said, “Lambo-san was achy and cold when he arrived.”

“I see. And please finish chewing before you answer. It’s impolite to speak with food in your mouth.”

Lambo paused and gave him another wide-eyed look, then nodded. It seemed the child appreciated to some extent having rules laid out.

“Did you stow away on something else to get here to Namimori from the airport?”

After Lambo swallowed he said, “On trains. They went really fast!”

He smiled slightly. “They do that here, yes. I’m impressed. Most people your age would never be able to make that trip on their own.”

Lambo beamed at the compliment and started chattering away a mile a minute. Hisui just smiled through all of it, nodded at times, and asked the occasional question. The child was actually delightful when he wasn’t off on a raging terror of chaotic behavior.

“Do you think you’ll start going to school here?” he asked once the child wound down.

Lambo got a look of horror on his face, then leaned forward. “Lambo-san can’t do that,” he whispered. “Lambo-san has trouble with—with—” He frowned cutely. “The squiggly writing.”

He chuckled. “There are several forms of Japanese writing and each has its own use. Did you go to school in Italy?”

Lambo shook his head.

“How did you manage to read the signs so you knew which trains to stow away on?” he asked curiously.

Lambo produced a cell phone from his hair and woke it up, then showed him a little app that translated images of writing on the fly.

“Very clever, chibi. Again, I’m impressed. Would you like to learn about Japanese writing forms?”

Lambo gasped. “Really? Nagao-san will teach Lambo-san?”

“Yes. I don’t make offers I don’t mean. Besides, since you’re in the country illegally it isn’t as though you could easily be enrolled in school here to learn the normal way, and your parents certainly aren’t in evidence.”

“Lambo-san is an orphan,” the child said matter-of-factly.

“Eh?”

“Lambo-san was told that his mummy died and his daddy was killed by Reborn.”
“Are you even a bloodline Bovino?”

Lambo looked confused.

“Who is your guardian?”

“Lambo-san doesn’t know.”

“I see.” He would worry about that later. “Let me make some tea, and then we can start a lesson.”

Lambo scampered off shortly before lunch, probably so that Nana wouldn’t get worried. That evening he told Renato what he had learned from Lambo, which caused his lover to become thoughtful. “I don’t actually know, either,” he said. “Let me do some checking. It’s turning into a bizarre little mystery.”

Renato was often seen tapping away at his laptop over the next several days, and finally had something to share. “The kid’s not bloodline.”

“So who the hell is he?”

“This is…” Renato shook his head. “Right. Lambo is the illegitimate son of Giana Vicario and Romeo LaMorte—yes, that Romeo—and was given to the custody of Giana’s sister, who happened to be married to a non-bloodline mafioso of the Bovino Famiglia. The sister and her husband are also dead. Technically, no one has proper custody of the kid.”

“I am starting to form a picture in my head of why Lambo-kun is the way he is,” he said slowly, “and possibly why he was sent off with one hell of a lie.”

Renato nodded.

“But of course, should Lambo end up as one of Tsuna’s guardians, I expect the Bovino boss would weep tears of joy, and not because of the supposed honor.”

“It’d be because the kid was no longer his responsibility in any way,” Renato said.

He sighed and reached out for a cigarette.
Aside from a little prank they played on Tsuna one morning, having convinced him that he had reacted to an intruder in the middle of the night by shooting and killing the man, nothing much else happened during September. Hisui continued to tutor Lambo in the mornings on days when he was not on duty and the child was being a perfect angel for him. Renato, however, was still dealing with the occasional assassination attempt, but he was being much gentler in how he deflected them. Yori had taken a liking to the little cow, and Leon did not seem to mind him.

Renato’s birthday arrived and, while he would normally celebrate it very quietly, with just Hisui, they had Tsuna to torture, so Hisui went around letting everyone know there would be a party at Nana’s. Tsuna was confused, he could see, because everyone kept acting strangely around him.

He could almost see the light bulb go off over the kitten’s head, when the thought occurred to him that it was his birthday the next day. He smiled slightly and said, “Everyone’s preparing for a birthday party.”

“Whoa… But you really shouldn’t be telling me about that,” Tsuna said, a flush of pleasure staining his cheeks.

“I only forgot to tell you.”

Tsuna looked momentarily confused.

“You look happy,” he observed.

“You look happy,” he observed.

Of—of course.”

‘Oh, he definitely thinks it’s for him. Excellent.’ After school he shadowed the kid to the Sawada home and reported to Renato on the way, finding as much amusement in what Tsuna was doing as he was in listening to his lover’s reaction.

“I wonder what they’ll do,” Tsuna said to himself. “How should I react?” He faked a bunch of reactions that had Hisui in stitches. As Tsuna reached his house he said, “Anyway, I’ll just pretend not to notice what everyone is doing today.” He opened the front door and was pelted with streamers and confetti, much to his shock.

“Happy birthday!” everyone cried.

“Thank you,” Renato said warmly. “I appreciate that you guys gathered for me today. I continue to be an adult.”

Tsuna’s expression revealed that his brain was melting from confusion. “I—I thought it was for me,” he whispered. “I feel like a fool…”

Nana noticed her son’s expression and suddenly brightened. “Oh my! Tsu-kun’s birthday is tomorrow! Shall we combine them?”

Tsuna slowly turned his head to look at his mother, his expression easing slightly. He looked at Renato, who merely smirked at him.
“We got the sushi from Yamamoto-kun’s house,” Nana announced as they all filed into the living room and saw the spread.

“Wow, thank you, Yamamoto-kun,” Tsuna said as he knelt down on a cushion.

“I’ll split them up,” Haru said.

“Feast!” Lambo cried. “Feast!”

Bianchi snarled. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll kill you, you stupid cow.”

That made Tsuna realize something was off and he started looking around, finally spotting Hayato crouched in the corner. Renato handed a set of tinted glasses to Bianchi as Tsuna went over to his friend.

“I remembered your birthday, Jūdai, but it’s over for me.” Hayato collapsed, having caught another glimpse of Bianchi’s face before she slipped the glasses on.

“It’s a disadvantage not to participate in a Vongola-style birthday party,” Renato said. When Tsuna cast a look of confusion at him he added, lying through his teeth, “Yes, in our famiglia, during the even year birthdays, we have to do the Legendary Vongola-style Birthday Party. The rules are simple. The person who’s actually celebrating a birthday gives scores to each participant for their ‘present’ or ‘performance’. And then, the participant with the highest score earns an elegant present.” He paused, looked directly at Tsuna, and added, “But if you score a zero, you die.”

Another meltdown commenced. Tsuna failed to remember that Hisui’s birthday had been normal, as had Hayato’s.

“Those are the rules,” Renato said earnestly. “Everyone secretly prepared just for this day. Since Yamamoto brought the sushi, he’s awarded eighty points. The scores will be posted on the Vongola Judge Board.”

Hisui placed a little sticker with an image of Takeshi’s face on the board Renato revealed.

“Where did this come from?” Tsuna wondered out loud as Takeshi said, “Eighty points isn’t bad.”

“In order to become a mafia wife,” a blushing Haru said to Tsuna, whose expression dragged down in despair, “I will get used to this kind of an event. Okay?”

“What the heck are you saying?” Tsuna shrieked. “Don’t just say things like that!”

“I made a present,” she continued. “I’ve made a pale yellow tie and matching handkerchief. They have a target pattern on them!” She held up both items and offered them to Renato.

“He’ll be targeted too easily,” Tsuna said nervously.

Haru’s eyes went wide and teary. “Now that you mention it…”

“Thank you, Miura,” Renato said quickly and accepted them. “I think they’re wonderful. Eighty-five points.”

Hisui promptly slapped another magnetic sticker in place. Bianchi went next with “genuine Italian pizza tossing”, which ended up being a new attack technique, and resulted in a number of things in the room, television included, being destroyed. She got ninety points, and Tsuna went green when Bianchi went off to bake a pizza for everyone.
“Are you going next, kitten?” Renato asked slyly.

“How could I have prepared? I didn’t even hear about this until today, and nothing about the contest! Lambo-kun probably didn’t prepare, either.”

“That’s not true!” Lambo said, and pulled out a stick with … something … on it. “Lambo-san made this yesterday!”

“What … is that?” Tsuna asked, leaning closer so he could examine it.

Lambo giggled. “It’s a Lambo stick! You put glue on your finger, do this—” He whipped his finger around like mad. “—to get the strings out, then you twirl around the hashi and get a Lambo stick.”

He looked so adorable trying to explain that Hisui was certain he had finally lost his mind, all over a little boy his lover could barely stand to be in the same room with.

“But what the heck is it?” Tsuna demanded.

“…Five points,” Renato said, his face going a bit shifty. “Your turn, Tsuna! If you forfeit, you die with zero points!”

“Hiiiie!”

“If you don’t like it,” Renato said darkly, aiming a gun at the kitten, “show me something.”

With the sheer number of meltdowns Tsuna had managed already in less than an hour, he was surprised the kid’s brains weren’t dribbling out his ears. And then a recovered Hayato spoke. “Jūdai, let’s team up!”

Tsuna ended up shoved into a box as Hayato explained all about the magic show they were going to do. To speed things along, after Tsuna was thoroughly scared out of his mind that he was going to die from being impaled with swords, Renato shot the kid, and then awarded a full one hundred points. Tsuna spent his birthday in the hospital. He never did ask about the alleged “elegant gift” he was supposed to get for winning. Neither did Hayato, strangely.

Several days later Tsuna came home from school and headed up to his room, where his tutors were waiting, and said, “I met a really weird person today. He beat up a dog without directly touching it…” He looked up from setting his school bag down and squeaked at the insects crawling over Renato’s hand.

“According to my friends here, I-Pin is in town.”

“Who?”

“An assassin from Hong Kong, also known as the Human Bomb.”

“What would such a frightening person be doing in town?”

“You mean in addition to all the other assassins already in town? What do assassins do other than killing?” Renato asked reasonably. “Now, it’s time for work.”

The next day I-Pin was all over the school, showing various students a picture, never saying a word. None of the students recognized whoever it was in the image. But when Tsuna ran across the assassin, a tiny finger jabbed upward repeatedly.

Hisui followed his charge up to the roof, where I-Pin was, and settled in to watch the show. I-Pin
took a bite of some gyōza, spoke in Chinese, and readied to attack.

“I don’t understand you,” Tsuna said quietly, shaking his head.

“Yesterday,” Hisui translated for his student, “I didn’t realize that you were my target, so I helped you, but today I will kill you.”

“Huh?” Tsuna turned toward him. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s I-Pin, the assassin.”

“Eh? It can’t be. This little kid?”

I-Pin spoke again, but Tsuna was already starting to freak out. “It’s that psychic power again that lets him defeat people without direct contact!?”

He sighed. “It’s no such thing. There’s a secret to this technique.”

And then I-Pin attacked, and Tsuna crumpled. “I can’t breathe… Help. What’s the secret? I’m going to be killed.”

He noted that none of what Tsuna was saying came out quite right when the boy couldn’t properly catch his breath. It all sounded so apathetic, in direct contrast to the look of panic suffusing his features. “Help? Sure.” He lifted a gun and fired as a distraction. The miasma surrounding Tsuna shattered and wisped away as he sucked it into a micro-wormhole.

“It stinks!” Tsuna complained. “What is this? Garlic?”

“That’s the secret of the technique. It’s called Gyōza-Ken. I-Pin condenses the smell from the gyōza using kenpō and sends it directly to the brain of the opponent, which numbs their brain. Once that happens, the muscles move by themselves, making it look like the person is being manipulated by psychic powers.”

Tsuna sat up and stared at the tiny assassin. “It’s a stinky means of self-defense? That can’t be true. Such an amazing technique is actually garlic? So … lame…”

I-Pin snarled silently and started sweating, then nine pinzu appeared on her forehead.

“W-what is that?” Tsuna asked shakily.

“The countdown for the Pinzu-Timed Super Explosion has begun,” he explained. “I-Pin’s shyness is at an extreme level. When it reaches peak, the nine-pin appears on I-Pin’s forehead.”

“He’s shy!?”

“The number of pinzu decreases steadily, and once it finishes counting down, the gas is released all at once, resulting in a massive explosion. It can cause a small crater.”

“That explains the name ‘Human Bomb’!”

“Make way, make way, Master of the Obvious coming through.”

“Oh, there you are,” Kyoko said, coming through the open doorway from the stairwell. She showed something to I-Pin who, after a moment, latched onto Kyoko’s leg, much like Lambo did to him on occasion.
“I-Pin is drawn to people due to overwhelming shyness during countdown, to be comforted. Or possibly just to blow someone up. I’m not entirely sure on that point,” he said, pressing a finger to his lower lip.

“Kyoko-chan is in danger!” Tsuna rushed forward, wrenched the child away from his not-so-secret crush, and threw her. I-Pin landed in Hayato’s arms, who had just arrived from the stairwell. Suddenly, it was like someone had started a volleyball game up on the roof, or perhaps hot potato, and even Takeshi arrived to join in the fun. When he ended up catching, and Tsuna screamed for him to throw as far as he could, Takeshi did so without question. I-Pin exploded far overhead as they watched.

Hisui knew from what Renato told him that she would be unharmed, so he reached out to catch her and bring her back down safely. Gokudera dashed over and tied her up, and Hisui filched the photograph from her. He looked at it, looked at the girl, and said, “You were sent to kill the person in this picture?”

She nodded.

“This isn’t Tsuna-kun,” he pointed out, then offered the photograph in the general direction of Tsuna and Hayato as I-Pin showed shock. He crouched down and said gently, “You’re still inexperienced.” He removed the rope and tossed it back to Hayato. “And you should probably consider wearing glasses.”

The next evening he was told a lovely story about how Lambo was now a “broccoli monster” and an “idiot”, that I-Pin had tried on a pair of glasses to help with her severe nearsightedness, and that Lambo had accidentally shot her with the Ten Year Bazooka, revealing to Tsuna that I-Pin was, in fact, female. Then she exploded again after Lambo managed to provoke her simply by existing (as a “broccoli monster”), which temporarily awakened her future-sealed Pinzu-Timed Super Explosion ability. A relatively normal day, in essence.

Lambo continued to spend alternate mornings at the house, learning from Hisui, and October bled into November. Bianchi turned eighteen and cooked; and no one ate dinner that night. And then December was nearly on their doorstep.

“I think it’s time,” Renato said, a weird grin on his face. “Let’s have Dino for a visit.”

His mouth twitched. “It has been a while. I rather miss him.”

“You make the call,” Renato said. “He always did respond more calmly to you. It’s strange, really. You frighten the hell out of the kitten, but everyone else responds just beautifully for you. Even Lambo is being less of a pain in the ass. Hayato is almost always calm around you…” His lover eyed him, head tilted to the side.

“Ano… You’re the one suspected of fixing me,” he replied. “Is this your way of secretly telling me you want a child?” Teasing his lover with an absolutely deadpan expression was always amusing.

Renato’s eyes went wide. “Uh…”

“Maybe I have some hint of another flame that’s vaguely analogous to Rain Flames, except that my resting expression is ‘back the fuck off’ instead of ‘tranquility awaits’.”

Leon morphed into a magnifying glass almost before Renato could reach for him. His lover studied him for a bit, then shrugged. “I can’t really tell, but it’s a thought. I always have had trouble seeing your flames.”
He shrugged. “Yes, I’ll call him.”

Dino was thrilled to hear from him, and even more thrilled to hear that he was being invited to visit if he could spare the time, to see them, and to meet his fellow … victim. “I can really come!? It’s been months! But, ah, can you ask Renato to please not shoot me?”

“I’ll consider it,” he promised. “You can either stay at a hotel, or we can put some of you up. You know how big the house is. Shamal was staying here, but he’s out tomcatting around somewhere.”

“Well… How about me and my primary guardians at your house, and the rest can use a hotel? They get upset if I don’t have at least twenty people with me in the area. I’m not sure why.”

He rolled his eyes slightly. Dino had yet to figure out that his abilities halved any time he was without at least one of his men. He had so endeared himself to them that they all jumped to do his bidding and acted like his older brothers. Gods help whoever he fell in love with and wanted to marry. “That sounds fine, Dino-kun. Shoot me an email with when you’ll be here so we make sure at least one of us is present at the house instead of both of us being off torturing Tsuna-kun.”

Dino laughed a bit nervously. “I will!” he promised. “See you soon.” He arrived on the first of December and Hisui showed him and his guardians to rooms so they could drop off their things, then nudged them into the kitchen and into seats. Romario had called when they landed, giving him time to prepare a meal for when they showed up.

He plied them with food and drink and got caught up on everything that had happened recently over in Italy—though Dino had been sending regular emails—and then listened to it all over again once Renato got home. The next day they went over to Nana’s house, all but Romario and Ivan of Dino’s men staying outside, and after speaking with Nana for a bit, they went upstairs to lurk in Tsuna’s room.

It was not long before there was a mild swelling of sound from outside the house, and then the sound of footsteps thudding up the stairs. “Ren-san! This is your doing, isn’t it?” came Tsuna’s accusatory voice. He slammed into the room and squeaked.

“We’ve been waiting for you, kitten,” Renato said.

“W-what’s going on?”

“Yo, Vongola Capo. I traveled from afar to pay a visit to you.”

Tsuna shifted his gaze from Renato to the high-backed leather chair that was new to the room.

“I’m…” Dino swiveled the chair around. He was dressed fairly casually in a set of cargo pants, a dark red t-shirt, and a green and black jacket with a fur collar. “…the Cavallone Decimo, Dino.”

Tsuna freaked; Hisui sighed; Renato smirked.

Dino hummed thoughtfully, then frowned. “He’s no good!” He propped an elbow on the chair’s arm and rested his head against his fist so he could stare at Tsuna. “You don’t have the aura. The way you present yourself is terrible. There’s no sense of anticipation.”

“Your legs are short,” Renato contributed.

“You don’t seem ambitious, either,” Dino continued, shifting to cross his arms over his chest. You look unlucky, too. Your disposition to be a boss is zero.”
Tsuna blushed in humiliation as Dino’s men guffawed behind him. “Hey, Ren-san! Who are these scary guys!?”

“Dino is our previous student, your senpai.”

“Huh?”

Dino chuckled and relaxed, leaning forward. “Don’t let the things I said get you down, Vongola Decimo. Before I met these two, my capabilities to be a boss were zero, too.”

Tsuna let out another of those long, quiet squeaks.

“We taught Dino-kun how to become a mafia boss before coming here,” he said.

“Just look at that face,” Renato said. “The kitten thinks you’re super cool, Dino.”

“Well… Thanks to these two I’m now the boss of five thousand family members. Truth be told, there are still many things I wanted to learn, but they insisted on coming here to teach you, so I had to let them go.”

A droplet of sweat rolled down the side of Tsuna’s face and he gained a sheepish expression.

“Ano… There seems to be some misunderstanding. I have no desire whatsoever to become a mafia boss.”

Dino started laughing, as did Romario and Ivan. “It’s just like they said! You’re exactly the same as I used to be. In the beginning, I thought becoming a mafia boss was absolutely insane. Decent guys don’t seek to join the mafia in the first place, right? We were born to it, though. If you keep refusing…” Dino’s expression shuttered and he reached into his jacket, then pulled out Enzo. He thrust the turtle at Tsuna and grinned. “He’ll bite you!”

Romario and Ivan started laughing again as Tsuna’s ass hit the floor. “He fell for it!” Romario said in delight.

“This turtle is called Enzo,” Dino said. “I asked for Leon, but Renato gave Enzo to me instead.”

“Well, Leon is mine,” Renato muttered darkly. “Or maybe I’m his.”

The pitter-patter of little feet sounded in the upper hallway, then Chinese. I-Pin burst into the room, being chased by a grenade-wielding Lambo. “Lambo-san is a broccoli with branches!” Lambo declared loudly.

“Oh no,” Tsuna whispered. “Lambo-kun! Didn’t I tell you not to play with grenades?”

Lambo turned his head toward Tsuna and missed seeing the cord in his path; he tripped. The pins were ripped free as Lambo hit the floor, and the live grenades went flying out the window. “Uh oh.”

“Idiot!” Tsuna shouted.

“Nice going, kitten, you distracted him,” Renato said as Dino leaped to his feet and jumped out the window.

Tsuna rushed over and hung halfway out over the sill. Hisui knew without bothering to get up that Dino would uncoil his whip, use it to capture the grenades, and fling them into the sky on his way down, so they could explode safely away from his men.

The men outside laughed and chuckled indulgently as Dino landed. “It’s just one of the boss’s antics
again,” one said.

“He surprises us at least once a day,” another added.

Hisui reached over and snagged the cow, pulling the kid onto his lap for the moment. Lambo squealed happily and snuggled in.

“He’s so cool,” Tsuna said admiringly.

“Do you understand now?” Renato asked. “A mafia boss will risk his life for his men.”

Tsuna whipped around with a scowl on his face. “Don’t relate everything back to that!” he whined.

Renato moved to the window and called down, “Dino, why don’t you stay a bit,” as if they hadn’t planned part of this in advance. “You can let your men go back.”

“Hey,” Tsuna muttered, “why are you deciding these things on your own?”

“We don’t have to worry if you’re with those two,” one of his men said to his fellows.

Dino sighed. “All right. I might as well give the Vongola Decimo a piece or two of advice, then.”

“For me?” Tsuna said quietly. “How nice.”

Hisui noted that Tsuna did not appear to be leaking sarcasm, and wondered at the flip-flop of attitude the kid was displaying. Was being “cool” really such a lure? Renato, on the other hand, was definitely mocking the kitten slightly when he said, “Aren’t you lucky, Tsuna?”

Before they left, Hisui slipped a temporary spare key to Romario, so the guardians could get back into the house. It had recall runes engraved on it, just in case. Nana called them down for a meal shortly thereafter and they all filed into the kitchen and took seats. Lambo and I-Pin were already waiting, and Lambo was behaving reasonably sane considering that Hisui was present.

Nana served everyone as Dino said, “So, ask me anything, my cute new little brother.” When Tsuna froze up, bowl and hashi half way up, Dino said, “Oh yeah, do you have a family yet?”

“He has Gokudera-kun and Yamamoto-kun,” he said, “and a few candidates in Hibari-kun, Sasagawa-kun, and—”

“They’re just my friends and senpai!” Tsuna interrupted. “But why did you even come like this? You seemed to be doing just fine with Dino-san.”

“Vongola is the center of our allied famiglie,” Dino answered. “That’s why it gets priority above all others in every aspect.”

He eyed the mess Dino was steadily making; as usual, the kid never even realized it.

“The Vongola is that influential?” Tsuna asked.

“Yes.”

Nana wandered back into the room and paused. “Oh my, Dino-kun. You spilled your food. Let me get something for that.” She wandered back out.

“Without his men, Dino functions only half as well,” Renato said in an aside to Tsuna. “He’s the type who can only use his powers for the famiglia or in front of his men. Without them, his
“Renato,” Dino said wearily, “you really want Tsuna to believe stuff like that? It’s just because I usually use forks and knives, so I can’t use hashi very well.”

He snorted. “Dino-kun, you spent a year in Japan.”

Dino jumped up in embarrassment, and promptly tangled his feet; he face-planted, thankfully missing anything more painful than the floor. The impact was accompanied by a shriek from Nana, who ran back into the kitchen. “In the tub! The bathtub!”

Renato finished the last of his meal and got up, heading to the bathroom. Hisui paused to settle Nana first. “Whatever it is—and I have a good idea—don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of it, all right? You haven’t even eaten yet, so get yourself something, sit down, and relax. Worry about cleaning up afterward.”

“Well, all right.”

He nodded and followed the others. Enzo had slipped away from Dino and gotten wet, unfortunately. As some unholy creation of Leon he was a little quirky. I-Pin dashed in and attempted Gyōza-ken, only to fail.

“Enzo is a sponge snapping turtle,” Renato explained in an aside to Tsuna. “He swells up to immense size if he’s immersed in water. The enlarged Enzo becomes feral and might well devour an entire house, or worse. Think Godzilla.”

“Stay back,” Dino said firmly, gently pushing Tsuna behind him with one hand, his other getting his whip. “Nobody interfere. It will be a disgrace for the Cavallone Famiglia if their Decimo can’t even take care of his own pet.” He readied his weapon and struck, saying, “Calm down, Enzo!”

Tsuna crashed into the wall, a nasty welt forming on his cheek.

“Sorry, sorry!” Dino cried. “I slipped!”

“Do you get it now?” Renato tried again. “He’s not fully himself if his men aren’t around.”

“Stop it, Enzo!” Dino lashed out again with his whip, nailing Tsuna, I-Pin, and Lambo that time. “Sorry, sorry! Are you okay?”

Hisui pulled the two little ones out of the way and shoved them behind him, stroking a healing finger across their hurts as he did so.

“Do something,” Tsuna hissed at them.

“He did say not to interfere,” Hisui replied, exchanging a look with Renato, then flicking his eyes up to Leon.

“But the house will be demolished at this rate,” Tsuna said in a panic.

Renato sighed and reached up to get Leon. “I won’t directly interfere, but Leon can help.”

Leon jumped off Renato’s hand and landed on Tsuna’s face, then morphed into a mask. Dino noticed in his peripheral vision and pivoted sharply. “You’re here, Romario? I thought you went back with the others. Idiot! Stay back and leave this to me!” Dino’s competency level skyrocketed and he was able to use his whip like a leash, suspending the monstrous turtle over the tub. “You need
to dry out, Enzo.”

Hisui grabbed a hair dryer and got to work.

Of course, Dino tripped on his way back up to Tsuna’s room and tumbled down the stairs.

The next morning they were back bright and early, to teach Tsuna another lesson—not that the kitten would necessarily recognize it as such—and to prepare for Dino’s evaluation of the kitten’s men. Tsuna got a funny little smile on his face on seeing Dino interact with his men, then a tentative look of realization when first Hayato, then Takeshi, showed up to walk with him to school.

“So that’s Tsuna’s family,” Dino said. “Children.”

“You seem concerned.”

“Of course,” Dino replied. “After all, it’s about the family of my cute new little brother who reminds me of my past.”

“And?” Hisui prompted. “Get your plan ready. You want to test their trustworthiness, so let’s get started.” He sped off to shadow the kids and listen to them talk. A short time later a Lamborghini with tinted windows roared up and screeched to a halt. The door popped open, a whip lashed out and ensnared Tsuna, and yanked him into the car. The door slammed shut and the car squealed away.

“Jūdaiime!”

“Tsuna-kun!”

“That’s unfortunate,” he said. “Looks like the Momokyokai yakuza that controls the area around here. You middle-schoolers won’t stand a chance against adult mafiosi. Leave it to the police,” he advised, never mind that no mafiosi would ever involve the police voluntarily.

“Like hell,” Hayato said before rushing after the car.

“I’ll leave the police to you,” Takeshi said, then followed.

The car pulled up off to the side and Dino emerged, dragging a still bound Tsuna with him. “Well,” Dino said, “they froze up at first, but it seems they’re set on rescuing Tsuna. I think they’re trustworthy.”

“What are you doing, Dino-san!” Tsuna cried, struggling against his bonds.

Dino turned back to start untying him with the help of one of his men. “Sorry, sorry, I just had to test your men.”

“Test!”

“Hey, capo, we’re gonna go.”

“Good work, guys!”

“Wait, wait! What about Gokudera-kun and Yamamoto-kun?”

“Don’t worry,” Dino said soothingly. “Momokyokai is just some imaginary yakuza group Hisui made up. You’re a lucky guy, Tsuna. Such thoughtful family members.”
“They’re my friends,” Tsuna cried in frustration, “not members of a famiglia!”

“Ano… That’s right, I forgot to mention that detail,” Hisui said, a finger pressed to his lower lip. “Momokyokai is a real yakuza group here in Namimori. I hear they’re very good with martial arts.”

Dino and Tsuna both erupted on him, but he ignored that and started to wander off in a random direction. Dino and Tsuna exchanged a look, then took off after the boys.

That afternoon he was given the other half of the story. Renato had been waiting at the yakuza’s headquarters with some of Dino’s men. Hayato and Takeshi took care of the lesser yakuza, and Dino assisted when the stronger ones arrived, though not without having nailed his allies before Renato and Dino’s men revealed themselves.

Hisui was just getting ready to dish up dinner when the doorbell went. Renato escorted Hayato in a minute later. “You’re—staying here?” the boy asked, eyeing Dino.

“Yep! Well, the core group, anyway.” Dino introduced his men and grabbed a seat, smiling happily when Hisui slid a plate of lasagne and garlic-roasted asparagus in front of him. He also set a basket of garlic bread on the table, and a big bowl of salad for people to help themselves to.

“I think it’s time to step things up a little,” Renato said. “All of this has been amusing, but at some point…”

“People are gonna start showing up,” Hayato said.

“Yes. Dino, you want to help?”

“Of course!”

“There’s a spot we can go to not too far outside town,” he said.

“You’re not taking him … there?” Dino asked.

“Not yet,” Renato said, “though … soon.”

They waited until after Hayato left to actually discuss the plan. If Hayato’s loyalty was where it should be, he would have felt compelled to clue his boss in on the deception they were planning. As it was, they hauled Tsuna off for a “picnic”, and it was not until they arrived that Tsuna bought a clue. It might have helped that someone spoiled it for him.

“Training?” Tsuna echoed. “We’re not here for a picnic?”

“We’ve traveled all the way to Japan to see my cute little brother,” Dino said. “I thought I could pass down my whip-handling skills to you.”

“Eh!?” Tsuna said as Dino offered him a whip. “Ano… I don’t think I’ll need a weapon.”

“Take it,” Dino insisted. “It’s my old one. I want you to have it.”

Tsuna accepted it with a look of surprise.

Dino fetched out Enzo and a bottle of water, then poured some onto his pet and set him down. “His size and aggressiveness varies depending on the amount of water. He’ll be your sparring partner. That hard shell will protect him.”

“What!?”
“Don’t worry,” Dino said. “Without any more water he won’t grow any bigger. When things get dangerous my men will help you.”

Enzo scuttled toward Tsuna much faster than a turtle ought to be capable of and Tsuna started to freak out, despite that fact that Enzo was not much bigger than Yori. “Hiiiie! Go away!” He lashed out with the whip and managed to wrap the end around Enzo, then yanked back and sent the turtle flying.

Unfortunately, Enzo landed in a nearby well. It went downhill from there, and Tsuna ended up in the hospital with a damaged leg. Had it been broken, Hisui would have considered sneaking in to dose the kitten with a potion and infusing him with magic, or Renato could have sped things up with Sun Flames, but there was no real need.

Once Tsuna was out Dino continued to help them torture Tsuna. They went to the Mountain of Death (where Bianchi, Haru, I-Pin, and Lambo had “somehow” gotten lost) and were repeatedly terrorized by Enzo, had a New Year’s Vongola-style “Family Versus” battle against the Cavallone Famiglia, and generally made Tsuna’s life hell while they still had willing assistance.

Lambo was doing very well with Japanese forms of writing. Either the kid was actually quite smart, or he adored Hisui so much that he was doing his damnedest to live up to his expectations. Given that, when Lambo showed up that morning for another lesson, Hisui decided to take him out shopping instead, and gave Nana a quick call to let her know he would be stealing the boy for the day rather than just the morning.

They went into a store that catered to the child-age range and browsed around. Lambo kept pointing at things he wanted—rather greedily, considering he wanted approximately the entire store’s inventory—but Hisui firmly told him, “Five things, chibi. One for each month you’ve been getting lessons from me and doing so well. So choose wisely. Preferably things you can play with over and over again.”

Lambo looked thoughtful at that and settled down a bit. “Does a box of crayons count as one thing, or many things?”

“You can’t buy individual crayons, so a box of them is one thing,” he replied.

Lambo hummed and started eyeing things more carefully. He was a very clever little cow in the end. He wanted crayons, a shrink-wrapped bundle of colouring books, a bucket of Legos, a tub of modeling clay, and a box of coloured chalk. He was headed to the register to pay when he noticed a young boy with European features looking around, with no parent in evidence. “Hold on just a moment, Lambo-kun. I’m curious.”

He went over to the child and tilted his head. “Are you all right?”

The kid stared at him, then nodded slowly. ‘So he understands Japanese, or he’s being polite.’ “Do you need any help? Because I don’t see anyone here with you, and I’m a little worried for you.”

“…I was trying to decide if I would go to the school now to see someone, or wait until after school let out.”

His brow furrowed at the answer. “That’s not going to be for some time if you wait. I’m Nagao Hisui, by the way. This little man with me is Lambo.”
The kid’s eyes widened. “Do you know Renato Sinclair?” he whispered.

“He’s my partner. He’s keeping an eye on our student today.”

The kid’s eyes got even wider and he bit his lip, then looked around quickly. “Tsuna-nii is your student?”

“Yes,” he said, wondering just how the kid knew that.

“There’s mafiosi after me… The Todd Famiglia. Can you help? I wanted to speak to Tsuna-nii because—well, because. But if you’re who I think you are…”

He smiled slightly. “Yes, I can help. So, let me pay for these things, and we’ll be off. I’ll take you someplace safe, and make sure you get to speak with Tsuna-kun, too. You stick close, okay?”

The kid nodded.

He continued on to the register and paid, then slung the bag over his shoulder and resettled Lambo, who kept trying to feel the thing up in anticipation, then motioned to the unnamed boy. He wasn’t getting any hinky feelings about the kid, so… “We’ll go around the corner and check to make sure no thugs are watching,” he said, “and then I’ll get us to the house real fast. Are you all right with that?”

The kid nodded again.

They ducked around behind the shop and he checked the area with his power, then crouched down long enough to heft the kid up to his other side. “Hold on. And you might want to close your eyes in case you get motion sickness. You, too, Lambo-kun.” Then he sped himself up fast enough to be a blur and made it to the house in record time. Once through the gate he slowed down to normal speed and set the boy down.

“Let’s go inside, then,” he said, and opened the door, then ushered the child in and followed. After divesting himself of his shoes and waiting for the boy to do the same, he led into the kitchen and parked Lambo in his usual seat, then set the bag on the counter. “Which toy would you like to play with?”

Lambo scrunched up his brow, obviously thinking hard, then said, “Lambo-san would like the Legos.”

He pulled the bucket out and set it on the table, then turned to the mysterious child. “Would you like something to drink? There’s water, soda, juice, tea…”

“Um, soda?”

He nodded. “Lambo-kun, would you like some grape juice?”

Lambo beamed and nodded. “Please, Nagao-san!”

“Please have a seat,” he told the boy, then got the drinks ready, and a soda for himself. “So, all right, you have men after you. Do you know if they’re in town?”

The kid nodded. “I saw them, three of them.”

He hummed and got out his earpiece, the one tied to Renato, and wore it. “Ren?”

“Yes?”
“Have you seen three bruisers in town at all? I have a boy here who’s being chased by the Todd Famiglia.”

“The Todd Famiglia? Those are not nice people. No, I haven’t, but… What’s this kid look like?”

“He has brown hair and eyes, about four feet tall, European, maybe eight or nine?”

“Ask him if his name is Fūta.”

“Is your name Fūta?”

The kid nodded and sipped his soda.

“Yes.”

“Okay, he’s Fūta de la Stella. The ranking kid?”

“Oh. Now I have a face to go with the name. Well, I found him in a store and brought him home for now. He was debating on when to go find the kitten to talk to him. I promised he’d get a chance to.”

“I see. I’ll bring Tsuna home with me, then. And I’ll keep an eye out on the way for those men.”

“Right. I’ll see you then.” He removed the earpiece and tucked it away. “Ren-kun says he’ll bring Tsuna-kun here after school, and keep an eye out for those men. Are you hungry?”

Fūta looked indecisive, so he let it pass for the time being and asked, “Well. How do you know Tsuna-kun?”

“Um, I saw him about six months ago, but I never actually talked to him.”

“From what I remember Ren-kun saying, you need to be able to see someone’s face to do a ranking, correct?”

“Yes.”

He nodded and changed the subject entirely. “What would you like to do while you wait?”

“Fūta-kun can play with Lambo-san?”

Fūta looked over in surprise. “Okay!”

Hisui wandered off and got a book, then settled in to read, ready to mediate any disputes that might crop up, though he hoped that the two would play amicably. When it got on toward time for lunch he got up and started to prepare spaghetti, since that would be simple and presumably something both boys would enjoy, and a salad.

Lambo was momentarily torn between his Legos and food, but food won out, and he swept all the blocks into the bucket after getting a nod from Fūta. Hisui said, “Chibi, you and Fūta-kun go wash up. We’ll eat in just a minute.”

Lambo nodded and led Fūta away, so Hisui set the table and slid dishes into place, then helped the chibi back into his seat when the boys returned. He did have to clean up Lambo’s face once they were done eating; the little guy had a wee bit too much fun with the spaghetti.

“You want the Legos again, or a different toy?” he asked once the table was cleared.
Lambo eyed Fūta, who glanced down at the bucket. “Legos again!”

“All right.” He set the bucket back on the table and turned away to clean up. Renato and Tsuna eventually appeared, so he set his book aside.

Fūta took one look at Tsuna and slid off his chair, which is when it all went funny. Fūta’s eyes went starry in a way he had never seen before, but had heard of. Things in the kitchen started floating, including Lambo, who started giggling madly, and Fūta began to speak. “Tsuna-nii’s sprinting ability is ranked 86,202 out of 86,202 people. Running ability is ranked 85,900 out of 86,202 people. Stamina is ranked 86,182 out of 86,202 people. Tsuna-nii’s ranking in overall abilities is … last place.” His eyes faded back to their normal brown and he pulled a big red book out of his jacket somehow.

‘How are these kids doing stuff like this?’ he complained. ‘Maybe all flame-users have some vague ability at magic? Life itself could be called a form of magic, I suppose, so life force…’

“His rankings haven’t changed at all,” Fūta muttered, setting the book down and getting a pen. “Well, I’ll write them down anyway. Punching strength, kicking strength, and sprinting ability are all last place… I wish Tsuna-nii would try harder.” He finished jotting down his findings and looked back up again, then blushed. “I finally get to meet you!” he said happily. “I’ve been calling you Tsuna-nii… Can I keep calling you that?”

While Tsuna was having a meltdown, Renato walked over and said, “Didn’t see those men, but they could be anywhere in town.”

“I’m being chased by the mafia!” Fūta told Tsuna. “Please, Vongola Decimo, Tsuna-nii, please help me!”

“What are you talking about!? How am I supposed to deal with the mafia being how I am!?”

“I know that,” Fūta replied. “Because you—” He glanced down at the book for a moment. “You’re placed last in overall combat ability and intelligence out of 872 mafia bosses.”

Hisui reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Great.”

“But you’re placed first in your inability to turn down requests!” Fūta pointed at the applicable line.

“Fūta is an informant,” Renato said. “His rankings are one hundred percent accurate, and information is very valuable in the mafia. It’s thought that if you could get his book, which is filled with rankings, the entire world would be in your grasp.”

“So that’s why the mafia are after you?”

“Yes, for this book. So save me, Tsuna-nii!” Fūta put on a wicked set of puppy-dog eyes and aimed them at the kitten.

“No… No, no, noooo! I’m not that bad at turning down requests!”

“That’s not all,” Fūta said happily and pointed at another line. “Tsuna-nii’s lack of ambition is also placed first amongst all bosses, so I won’t have to worry about you taking my book, will I?”

Tsuna started to go into another meltdown. “Why don’t you help him?” Renato said smoothly. “You’re not going to just leave a weak little animal out in the savanna for all those carnivores, are you?”
Fūta upped the intensity of his puppy eyes.

Tsuna made the mistake of looking too long and slumped. “F-fine.”

While Fūta was jumping up and down with happiness Hisui murmured, “Another opportunity, it seems.”

Renato nodded. “Kind of disheartening to hear that the kitten’s intelligence is…”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean hard work can’t make up for a lot,” he replied. “And he has guardians, at least one of which is very smart, and another is when he can focus. Even Lambo-kun is smart, but he’s too young yet to rely on in that sense.”

Renato aimed a skeptical look at the cow, who had enticed Fūta to start playing again, and even got Tsuna involved.

“Ren-koi, he’s basically learned Japanese writing in five months. He’s not an idiot.”

“All right, all right. Look, you keep the cow brat occupied for the next few days while I watch over Tsuna and Fūta. I don’t want him getting involved in any of this and mucking things up. I have every expectation that those Todd mafiosi are going to catch up and I want to maneuver Tsuna into saving the kid.”

“Sure. I’ll check his Italian and probably move on to French or English.”

“You could always start electrocuting the kid.”

He frowned. “What, because of that whole ‘thunder set’ and ‘electric horns’ business from a ways back?”

Renato nodded.

“Are you sure this isn’t just you wanting to torture the inept assassin in your life?” he asked suspiciously.

“Tesoro, you wound me,” Renato replied, placing a hand over his heart.

He snorted and shook his head. “Right. Why don’t you take those two to Nana-chan’s. Hopefully you’ll run across those men on the way. Or if not, maybe over the weekend. Fūta-kun seems set on getting protection from the kitten so we might as well deliver and subtly nudge Tsuna-kun in the process. Maybe that will have more of an impact than what’s been done so far.”

“And all else failing, when it gets warmer, we switch tactics.”

He nodded. “It worked for Dino-kun. Actually, is Mafia Land going to be in the area anytime soon?”

“Ah…” Renato took out his phone and started fiddling with it. Technology had, indeed, made the things into little computers, and they were exceptionally handy, so long as they had the proper software installed to protect their contents and connections. “It’s not scheduled to come this way until mid-March, but that’s a thought. We can have a little holiday…”

“Which means we take Tsuna-kun and his guardians to get the stuffing kicked out of them by Colonnello, while anyone else along has actual fun. Speaking of which, is Fon still in the area? I-Pinchan is still around, after all.”

“I’m not sure. But since he knows we’re here and she’s been living at Nana’s…”
He never, not even once, made reference to what could have happened to Renato, and he knew his lover appreciated that lack of “I told you so” from him. It had been approximately a year after Renato’s memories had been meddled with that they were clued into the “amazing reward” awaiting those who finished those mysterious jobs.

Whoever had done the memory alterations must have been working on a set of conditions that were less than intrusive; otherwise, Hisui’s memories would have been attacked. The thought of his lover being cursed into that tiny form still gave him disturbed dreams from time to time, usually after seeing one of the Arcobaleno. The fact that Renato sometimes woke up looking haggard told him that his lover also suffered from remembrance.

Renato had been replaced by a man they knew only as Ciro. He had no idea what he’d have done had Renato not backed out. Their relationship had still been relatively new, and to have his lover turned into an anomaly… He shook his head to clear away those thoughts. “Well, I see no reason why we can’t plan for that. Tsuna-kun, Hayato-kun, Takeshi-kun… possibly Ryohei-kun. I can’t see trying to get Hibari-kun involved, not as a Cloud.”

Renato shook his head. “No. He does need training, but he’d never stand for crowding of that nature.”

He nodded his agreement, then snickered quietly. “We should consider seeing if we can get Dino-kun to train him, next time he visits. That would be hilarious.”

Assuming Nono doesn’t send him here on some bizarre mission. He might get ideas from the reports we’re sending back. For all that he’s fairly detached, he does seem to have Tsuna’s overall welfare in mind. Devising tests for the guardians isn’t outside reason.”

“A fair point,” he allowed.

“All right. I’m going to shadow these two back to Nana’s. Keep Lambo here for a while, just in case. I’ll call if necessary.”

“Sure.”

Lambo was sad to see his playmates go, but happily enough played with Hisui, who found that Legos were a lot of fun, even as an adult. A text came in on his phone a couple of hours later: clean-up on aisle six. He blinked. That was an incident code they had worked out. He sent one back: depositing cargo first. Then he looked at Lambo and said, “It’s getting close to dinner time, chibi. I need to get you back to Mama.”

Lambo fussed a bit, but willingly enough allowed himself to be carried off to the Sawada home at high speed and handed over. Hisui went to rendezvous with Renato, and found him with three knocked out men. “Tsuna-kun’s work?”

Renato nodded. “I’ll explain in detail after. Can you dump them somewhere like, I don’t know, a back alley in Tokyo or something?”

“Sure.” He was done quickly, then walked home with Renato.

Once inside the house Renato said, “So, we got to the house okay, but while we were upstairs those men showed up. They may have spotted Fūta through the window.” He shrugged. “The kitten upset me when he suggested getting Nana to send them away.”

He frowned and caught Yori when he jumped up to be petted. True, it was not unreasonable for a minor to look to an adult for protection, but Tsuna had wanted to pit his naïve mother against
mafiosi?

“Fūta objected, pointing out that, according to rankings he’d done, the Todd Famiglia is ranked seventh for bloodlust out of all the mafia famiglie. Tsuna then decided they’d sneak out the back door, which was fine, except that I-Pin was practicing back there and the men heard it, came to investigate… Tsuna and Fūta fled. The interesting thing was me hearing Tsuna say, ‘Sometimes I find myself disgusting. I’m glad I managed to run away.’ ”

“At least he has some level of self-awareness that his behavior could use some work,” he commented.

“Yes. I’m sure you can start building up a mental list of things to throw back in his face, because I just know it’ll be needed at some point. Anyway, the kids got separated and the men caught up with Tsuna, started threatening him, and Fūta came to the rescue, managing to pit the men against each other using his rankings on them.

“Unfortunately, Tsuna wasn’t able to get Fūta away while the men were fighting each other, because the kid wanted to write the rankings down. He’d forget, otherwise. That was when I shot the kitten, and he beat them into the ground. As soon as those two headed back to the Sawada house I contacted you.”

“Let me guess,” he said. “Fūta-kun is now terribly confused because Dying Will Mode has never been figured into his rankings, and Tsuna-kun has jumped straight to the top of the adoration list.”

Renato chuckled. “Yep. Nana was thrilled to have another kid in the house.”

The next day he watched as Fūta kept popping up to wave at Tsuna during school, encourage him during P.E. class, and generally be nearby. He got back to the house before Tsuna, ready to beat some homework into the kid, and was shortly joined by Fūta, who took a seat at the table in the room. When Tsuna arrived and trudged into the room his face fell on seeing the younger boy.

“What’s the matter?” Fūta asked. “You don’t look well.”

“Dino incoming,” he heard in his earpiece.

“Ano…” Tsuna let his bag slide off his shoulder and hit the floor. “You followed me everywhere today!”

“But I wanted to stay by your side,” Fūta said, eyes wide with uncertainty. “Do you need help with anything?”

“I—I don’t need anything,” Tsuna shouted. “Just don’t come to school anymore!”

He frowned at the severity of the reaction. Yes, the kid had made a something of nuisance of himself, but yelling at him was not going to solve anything. Fūta’s eyes started to go watery, but they were interrupted by the promised Dino, accompanied by a score of his men.

“Yo, Tsuna! How have you been?”

“Dino-san!”

Dino smiled, then switched focus to the younger boy. “Hm, there’s no mistaking it. This is the real Ranking Fūta, all right. It’s rare to come across you no matter how hard you’re trying.”

Fūta stood up and moved closer. “Hello, Bucking Horse Dino.”
“Nice to meet you,” Dino said cheerfully. “It’s quite a feat to have earned his trust, Tsuna. Let’s get down to business, though. There’s a reason why I came today. Fūta, I’d like to purchase the rankings of a certain mafia famiglia.”

Tsuna went into meltdown, seemingly unable to understand just how valuable Fūta’s ability was, or why anyone would care.

“In our area lately, the Gospella Famiglia has been passing firearms to hoodlums and bringing harm to civilians. We can’t let them get away with it, so I’d like a list of their most influential weapon dealers. Can it be done? And of course—” He nodded to Romario, who flipped open a briefcase packed with bills. “—we have money.”

Fūta smiled. “That won’t be necessary. You rank number one out of 82,263 when it comes to mafiosi who care for the welfare of civilians! I like that kind of boss. And besides, Dino-nii, who is Tsuna-nii’s sworn brother, is also my brother, right?”

Dino looked a little surprised, then smiled. “I’m glad to have such a nice little brother. Thanks a lot, Fūta, Tsuna.”

Fūta copied some information down on a spare piece of paper and offered it to Dino. “Here’s a copy of the rankings.”

“Thank you! I hate to be in a rush,” Dino said, “but we really need to get this mess cleaned up. So, see you later!”

It went downhill from there, after he suggested that Fūta do some rankings for Tsuna. Haru showed up and made a nuisance of herself, I-Pin and Lambo scampered in, and Hayato dashed in to complain that no one had mentioned the Ranking Prince was around. At some point Takeshi showed up.

Haru went for rankings about her charm, what she liked best about Tsuna, Lambo was ranked most annoying and also number one when it came to people wanting to kill him and use him for a seat cushion.

Hisui frowned at that and glanced out the window; it had started raining.

Hayato supposedly loved kids and would be an excellent child-care worker, rather than his hope of being the Vongola Decimo’s right-hand man. While he was trying to deal with that shock, Bianchi came in and Hayato went down like the Titanic. “Take this opportunity and do a love ranking,” she said. “It’s time to clarify who loves who.”

He smirked. “I agree! Fūta-kun, please do a love ranking for Tsuna-kun.”

“What!? No!”

“Tsuna-nii’s love ranking … number one is … Leon!”

Hisui laughed softly, unable to help himself. Haru was devastated, Tsuna was having another meltdown, and the others were staring at Tsuna as if he really was a pervert.

“Haru has lost!” the girl wailed, stumbling over to the window to stare out morosely. “Haru’s heart is just like the sky; a rain storm.”

A second later everything hit the floor as Fūta snapped out of it. “Rain?”
Hisui realized that getting anything done at that point was going to be impossible unless he scared the living daylights out of everyone there, so he went home and resolved to speak with Tsuna the next day. He managed to steal the kid away after breakfast and haul him off to one of the lesser-visited parks.

“What’s this about?” Tsuna complained. “I had things I wanted to do.”

His brow went up. “This is about yesterday. And after we’re done talking, we’re going back to the house and you’re going to get your homework done, as I expect you didn’t bother last night. So, here’s the thing. You yelled at Fūta-kun.”

“He was being really annoying!”

“So are you, pretty much every damn day, but you don’t hear me yelling. Fūta-kun looks up to you, and trusts you. Are you trying to tell me that you find it so burdensome? That someone out there actually thinks well of you? You, the boy who’s been called a loser and no good for how many years now? And when someone does express admiration for you, your response is to yell at him? I can understand getting frustrated with someone like Lambo-kun. He’s only five and at loose ends. He’s not old enough to understand how his behavior affects others, not really. But you’re fourteen, kitten. Don’t you think you should be a little kinder, and try for once in your life to think about other people?”

“You’re not being very kind,” Tsuna said sullenly.

“Don’t avoid the issue. You nearly made Fūta-kun cry. Does that make you happy? Did you get some sense of pleasure out of it? Making someone smaller and weaker than you feel like that? So you’re saying it’s all right for the older kids at school to treat you like that? You deserve it? Because you’re smaller and weaker? You once asked Ren-kun to beat up a five year old, but you seemed to learn from that. Then you turn around and try to throw your mother under the bus, and yell at a child. I brought you out here so that no one else would hear, but I don’t want you to answer me right now, because all you’ll probably do is feed me a line of bullshit. So, we’re returning to the house and you will do the work you neglected yesterday.”

“I did do it!”

His brow went up. “Still with the yelling. Tell me something, is that yelling actually getting you anywhere? We’re going back to the house and I will look your work over. If necessary, you’ll re-do it.”

Tsuna’s expression congealed into a sullen pout, but he docilely enough got up when prompted and returned to the house. Hisui looked over the work and sighed at the number of mistakes and what he suspected were wild guesses, then began explaining how to do things, again. He sincerely hoped that Fūta’s ranking about the kitten’s intelligence meant little in the face of the billions of people on the planet.

Before he let Tsuna re-do his homework he wrote up sample problems and had him work on those first. He wanted to see that the kitten really was getting it. He also used his power to keep everyone else out of Tsuna’s bedroom, to avoid distractions.

“I don’t want to be in the mafia.” Tsuna’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“I know,” he said quietly. “Unfortunately, you were born into it. You either do or die.”

“And you?”
“I chose it. But I chose not to be an official member of any famiglia. I started out as a freelancer with an association to a famiglia and I still am, though I made connections with Vongola and Cavallone along the way. The work paid for my schooling, both high school and university, for my apartments, my clothes, my food, my house. I do a lot of translation work, too, so I have money from that. We spent five years tutoring Dino-kun, and helped him to set up a foundation that assists the people in his territory at no or low cost to them.”

“But you’ve killed.”

He looked Tsuna straight in the eyes. “Yes. I’ve killed roughly three hundred-fifty people since I was fourteen. Before that, and even after that, I spent a lot of time driving thugs away from your mother, people who wanted to steal from her or rough her up, to make sure my best friend didn’t get hurt. That’s how I got noticed.”

“D—driving them away?”

“Yes. I never made a kill until I was offered a job. Those three men you knocked out on Fūta-kun’s behalf? I disposed of them for you by taking them away while they were still unconscious. If they have any sense at all, after waking up in an alley elsewhere, they’ll stay the hell away from Namimori.”

“You—you didn’t kill them?”

He shook his head slowly. “Not my job, kitten. My job is to help raise you up, to make sure you and your men survive.”

“But they’re my friends,” Tsuna whined in frustration.

“Yes. What of it? They’re also your men. You don’t always—how can I put this?” He sighed. “Hayato-kun is your friend, but to him, his first thought is that you’re his boss. The friend part comes second to him. If you want to understand that better you’d have to ask him, because I’m not going to betray his trust. Sometimes people are family because they’re born to it, and sometimes it’s because you choose to be. To me, your mother is a sister, my little sister. We have no blood relation whatsoever. Dino-kun calls you his brother. Fūta-kun calls you his brother. They claim you as family because they want to, not because they have to. You’re my annoying little nephew.”

He smirked when Tsuna made a face. “Think about it, because we’re not going anywhere. And now, let’s get back to work, so you can finish up and go have some fun.”
“You’ll be amused to know that Lambo is apparently quite the lady killer ten years from now,” Renato said while waiting for dinner.

He looked back over his shoulder in surprise. “The Ten Year Bazooka struck again?”

“Yes. By the way...” Renato pulled a foil-wrapped box from his pocket and offered it to him. “I love you as much now as I did then, tesoro.”

He smiled slowly and accepted, then pulled a box from his pocket and offered it. Renato accepted with a silly smile and leaned in to kiss him. Before things got too out of hand, Hisui wedged a hand in between them and pushed gently. “You won’t get any dinner if you keep that up. Save it for later, caro.”

“But if I could have you for dinner,” Renato whispered.

He smiled and shook his head. “No. I’m not going to ruin good food I’m halfway through preparing. Save it for later.”

Renato sighed dramatically and stepped back to grab a cigarette and light it. After he exhaled he said, “Well. As to Lambo. We have to back up a little. Tsuna was getting all mopey because Kyoko didn’t give him any chocolates today.”

He snorted.

“He had no idea that she and Haru had shifted their time to make chocolates to today because Haru had a test. I’m a little vague on the details and it really doesn’t matter. Anyway, Leon let me know the kitten was all regretful, so naturally I shot him. He raced off to find his crush and ended up at the house. Bianchi had told the girls she’d help them.”

“No.”

“Oh yes. Oh, and Tsuna actually owns and wears a pair of boxers with little hearts on them.”

His shoulders shook as he ladled sauce onto the next layer of the lasagne.

“They tried to figure out how to get Bianchi out of the kitchen, but Fūta’s ranking ability isn’t exactly subtle and she chased them away from the kitchen. Tsuna did finally remember that the easiest route would be to use a fifteen year old Lambo, but—and I stress this—he said, ‘I can’t ask something like that.’ We’re still good on that point.”

“So what happened?” he asked, starting the next layer.

“Lambo and I-Pin were chasing each other around, the little cow tripped and slammed into the wall, and of course he cried. Out came the bazooka. Next thing we know a fifteen year old Lambo is there, sprawled on the floor, face just dripping with blood.”

He looked back over his shoulder again with a frown.

“Turns out, as I said, Lambo is quite the little heart-breaker. Girls love to present him with chocolate on Valentine’s, and he tries to be nice and eat all of it since they go to so much trouble. Too much
gives him a nosebleed, apparently. He got caught in some wind and, well, it splashed blood all over
his face. Tsuna was still being a decent person and saying he couldn’t possibly use the situation to
their advantage against Bianchi. And then Bianchi came in on her own, saw him, and tried to kill
him with pasta.”

He shook his head in bemusement.

“So I shot the kitten again. The chocolate was saved!” Renato cried, flinging one hand up. “Lambo
was saved! Unfortunately, the girls made the chocolate in pots, like a dipping sauce or fondue.”

“And Bianchi made up the rest.” He shook his head sadly. “What a waste.” He finished up and
shoved the lasagne into the oven, then snatched the cigarette out of his lover’s hand and stubbed it
out in the ashtray. “We have forty-five minutes. Let’s make it count.”

They were lounging in a tree in the yard, listening in, as Nana burst into the kitchen yelling, “Yes! I
won the grand prize in the raffle attached to the tea bottle!”

“Really?” Tsuna asked. “What did you win?”

“A cruise trip to an island!”

“A ship? I get seasick,” Tsuna said quickly. “Why don’t you go with someone else?”

“I love how he automatically assumes she’ll take him,” he murmured.

“Don’t say that! This is a luxury cruise ship! Tsu-kun, all you’ve ever been on are small boats.”

“W-well, it’s still a boat, right?”

“That’s where you’re wrong! Cruise ships are like luxury hotels on the sea! They have soft beds, and
high-class food. Like steak!”

“Steak?”

“And there are swimming pools and casinos on the ships! And even concert halls!”

“Nana sure sounds excited,” Renato muttered.

“I think she would have blown off Italy if Iemitsu-san had offered a cruise instead,” he replied. They
dropped down and slipped inside, in preparation for their part.

“At the end it’ll reach a paradise! The tropical sun will take away all your worries!”

“All my worries, huh? Well, I guess I can go, if you insist…”

“But it’s only for two people.”

“Eh…”

“I can’t just leave Lambo-kun and I-Pin-chan and Fūta-kun at home by themselves.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Hisui assured her, stepping into the kitchen.

“We’ll take care of the bra—children,” Renato added. “You two should have a chance to enjoy
yourselves once in a while.”

“Hisui-kun! Ren-kun! Really!?” Nana clapped her hands together in delight.

“So it’s just me and Kaa-san going on vacation?”

Nana grabbed Tsuna’s arm and pulled him close. “I wonder how many years it’s been since we gone on a vacation together? It feels like we’re going on a date!”

Tsuna freaked. “Ew, don’t joke around like that. It’s gross.”

‘And yet his crush shares so many similarities with Nana-chan,’ he thought.

On the day in question Renato drove one car and Hisui the other, because so many people were going to see the two off. Hisui had Lambo in his car, of course. Having him with Renato would have been asking for a major accident—or it would have been giving cow tipping new meaning. They saw Nana and Tsuna off and watched as they boarded the ship, then they swung into action. Hisui had everyone’s belongings safely stowed away, and a promise from the children to behave until it was time to cut loose.

As he, Renato, and Bianchi hustled the kids onto the ship he noticed Hayato, Takeshi, and Haru arrive and smiled slightly. Nana would take Tsuna to their room first, which gave them time to be pests. The kids were led off to the dining room and they approached the food-laden “Sawada” table. “Okay, Lambo-kun, go wild. But not too much, or you’ll get sick.”

Lambo laughed that obnoxious laugh and started stuffing food in his face. I-Pin and Fūta were more reserved. Bianchi just prepared a small plate for herself, as did he and Renato. By the time Nana and Tsuna arrived the table was bereft of food and Lambo was the only one in evidence. He was flat on his back on one of the chairs, holding his stomach. “Can’t … eat any more,” he mumbled.

Nana picked him up with a giggle. “What’s going on? Why are you here, Lambo-kun?”

Bianchi appeared. “When I told the stupid cow that Mama went on a trip he started crying. So I threatened him, and said that if he kept crying, Mama wasn’t going to come back. Then she started crying.” Bianchi glanced down to the side.

“I-Pin-chan is here, too!” Tsuna shrieked.

“Aw, you’re all here?” Nana said. “What a dilemma.”

He could see Tsuna freaking out again in the mirror he was holding between them. The kitten was looking everywhere in a panic, but never did notice the two of them sitting at the next table over, backs to the scene.

“Then … they’re here, too?”

The mirror went away and they popped up behind their student. “Chaos,” Renato greeted.

Tsuna jumped in fright and whipped around. “How did you all get in here!?”

‘Still with the yelling.’

“Oh, we charged right in at the entrance and beat up all the guards, of course,” Renato said as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

Tsuna started to yell something, but choked on whatever it was. His eyes went wide with fear as he
looked back toward the entrance, then over at grand staircase leading down into the dining room. The non-Nana adults took that opportunity to grab children and hide them under the table with Bianchi. Hisui and Renato resumed their earlier seats and blended in, and the mirror came back out.

“Have you seen any suspicious kids around here?” a guard asked Tsuna.

“N-no!” Tsuna’s flailing around in a panic surely was not suspicious, at all, no.

The guards all wandered off, so they came up behind Tsuna again. “Hm, not good,” Renato said, scaring another jump out of the kitten. “If we get caught, even Tsuna and Mama will get chased off the ship onto one of the deserted islands along the way.”

Nana had been served a steak by one of the staff and was happily eating, oblivious to everything else.

“Our tropical vacation is ruined?” Tsuna said weakly.

“Relax,” Bianchi said carelessly. “Everything will be fine. We just want to have a nice vacation, too.”

Tsuna took a deep breath and let it out. “Are you guys going to hide here until we get to the island?”

“What kind of talk is that?” Renato said. “We’re assassins.”

“We’ll just remove all the guards,” he added.

Lambo and I-Pin jumped out from under the table and posed. Lambo had grenades ready (still bright pink, so they were kiddy-class), Renato had a gun out, and Hisui just smiled.

“Y-you can’t do that!” Tsuna objected. “No! Wait! Don’t leave!” he cried as they took off.

Lambo was caught just a few minutes later, he could hear. He had told the kid not to eat too much, but… Tsuna snatched him up and hauled him off to the Sawada suite. He tucked Lambo into a bed and dashed off again. I-Pin had somehow been switched with her older self and was in a confused panic. She had no idea where she was and Kawahira-oji’s ramen would get soggy, whoever that was. Tsuna managed to get her into the suite as well, so she could switch back.

Hisui let himself be “caught” simply so he could say, “Did we forget to mention? Fūta-kun, Haru-chan, Takeshi-kun, and Hayato-kun are also all hiding on the ship.” While Tsuna was having another meltdown, he sped off and rejoined his lover.

That evening they all met up at the bow of the ship so they could watch Mafia Land come into view. The sheer number of attractions was amazing. Tsuna staggered up to them and gave a little sound of surprise at seeing everything. He perked up a bit and grabbed the railing, eyes widening.

“Mafia Land is something, isn’t it,” Hisui commented quietly.

It didn’t register at first, but then Tsuna’s head snapped around to look at him. “Mafia Land?”

He nodded. “I think the only person who has no idea is Nana-chan. Takeshi-kun assumes it’s part of the usual game and Haru-chan just doesn’t care so long as she can spend time with you. Of course, she’s probably also daydreaming about her wedding to you. Everyone has proper tickets. We were just all having fun playing hide and seek earlier.”

“Why—couldn’t you have invited Kyoko-chan?” Tsuna asked, his voice quiet and almost hurt in
He looked over. “We did, kitten. Considering the number of times we’ve arranged for you to be able to spend time with her, I’m a little hurt that you think we’d be that kind of cruel. This jaunt conflicted with their family trip, so they weren’t able to join us. Mafia Land doesn’t stay in one place, so we had to arrange the trip for when it would be close enough to us. It takes a long time for it to make its usual circuit.”

“Oh.” Tsuna’s expression eased a little, then flipped over into shock. “Wait, what? It’s not a normal island?”

“No in the slightest.”

“But… If that’s Mafia Land, then…” Tsuna looked back over his shoulder.

“Everyone on board is connected to the mafia. Mafia Land is a paradise created by multiple famiglie having pooled together their money, to have a place where they could relax, and even be a bit childish. It has some special aspects to it, to help make it less visible to the world, but since it mostly travels in international waters…” He shrugged. “Not everyone can come here.”

“What do you mean?” Tsuna asked, looking interested in spite of himself.

“Famiglie who indulge in the baser aspects of the underworld are not allowed. They weren’t even allowed to contribute to the funds for it.”

Tsuna furrowed his brow, no doubt thinking that all aspects were base.

“Illegal or unwilling prostitution, drug trafficking, slave trading—-that sort of thing.”

Tsuna went bright red.

“We’ll be arriving fairly soon, but we’ll spend the night on the ship, and head to the island in the morning. So, don’t give your mother any trouble when it comes time to wake up. You’ll want to get breakfast before we head out. There’s a lot to do, so you’ll be sorry if you don’t eat first.” Never mind what they had planned for the kid. He felt the barest twinge of guilt intrude upon his psyche, but brushed it away. The opportunity was there; they had taken it. They were being paid to do a job, and they hadn’t actually had to pay for the tickets, not with their reputation and their association with the Vongola. He nearly laughed to himself over that, but stifled it before it could escape.

“I’ll try.”

“I hope so.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s time for dinner.” He moved far enough away to capture Lambo and heft him up into his arms. “Come along, chibi. Hopefully you’ve worked up an appetite today.”

Lambo squealed and nodded. “Lambo-san has! Lots and lots of running around.”

Because had Tsuna really expected the little cow to stay in the suite where he’d been parked? Dinner was reasonably calm, and afterward there was some shuffling as people were shown to various rooms, though it was mostly the children who needed a little help. Bianchi and Haru shared a room, while Hayato and Takeshi shared another. Fūta promised to do his best with Lambo and I-Pin for the night, and was told which rooms had Nana and Hisui, just in case.

The next morning they gathered again for breakfast, ate, then disembarked onto the “island” known as Mafia Land. Nana was having raptures over the place, but her eyes kept flicking around to check
to see where the younger children were. “Tsu-kun, look,” she said, then gestured.

“Wo~ow! A beach!”

Hisui looked at Renato, confused. They were on an island—man-made or not, it made no difference—so why was a beach so surprising?

Bianchi, Lambo, and I-Pin took off for the little changing stalls and Tsuna threw his hands up in the air. “Yes! I’ll put my worries aside and have a great time!”

“Ah, no,” Renato said as Haru and Fūta headed off toward the water.

“Huh?” Tsuna’s arms dropped down like limp noodles.

“You have to go to the reception desk to check us all in. You’re our representative.”

“We’ll wait for you here,” Nana said, “so don’t take too long!”

Tsuna heaved a sigh and looked away from the beach. “You totally ruined my mood.”

“It’s how it works,” Renato said matter-of-factly, then pointed. “That building right there. See the entrance?”

Tsuna heaved another sigh and slouched off.

“Nana-chan, we’ll go make sure he does things right. You have fun, and we’ll catch up as soon as we can, but don’t be surprised if we get a little distracted. There’s so much to do here!”

She smiled and nodded, then went off to keep an eye on the swimming.

Before boarding the subway, Renato paused to speak with one of the resort workers about Takeshi and Hayato. By the time Tsuna had been tossed into the subway car they were already present there, waiting.

“Huh? A subway? Why am I on a subway? Where is it taking me!?” Tsuna said from his floor-sitting position.

“We’re going to the back end of Mafia Land,” Renato said.

Tsuna jumped up with a yell. “You planned this! What’s going to happen to me?”

Renato shrugged and gazed out the window. “You’ll know when we get there.”

Tsuna turned to Hisui with a demanding look on his face.

“Hm? Oh, we’re here,” he said as the vehicle jerked to a stop and the doors opened. He pushed Tsuna out and followed, Renato behind him.

“So, you had the guts to come,” a new voice commented. “Tell me your name.”

Tsuna looked around, then cried out in pain when someone kicked him in the shin. He looked down to see a figure about Lambo’s size, with blond hair, pale blue eyes, and wearing military gear. A hawk was perched on his helmet.

“Chaos, Colonnello.”
The chibi whipped out a gun and fired; Renato nimbly dodged and shot back. Hisui pulled Tsuna off to the side to watch as the two men had some fun together with dangerous live weapons. Tsuna’s expression was horrified, scared, and … intrigued.

“Puny little bullets like these could only belong to you!”

“Using anti-tank weaponry? Your hobbies are still so tacky.”

“Are—are you friends?” Tsuna asked.

Both stopped shooting and looked at him. “We’re not friends. I just happen to know him,” Colonnello said, a frown on his face.

Renato made a rude noise.

“What are you doing here?” Colonnello asked Renato.

Renato shot him a look, the “are you fucking kidding me?” look. “I’m just here to observe while our pupil undergoes training.”


“Mafia Land’s back end or, as some call it, backstage, is a training ground,” he explained.

“The mafia isn’t completely ruthless,” Renato said. “On this island, even if you’re branded an intruder, you still get another chance to be tested. This training ground is that chance, and the person who’ll be testing you is Colonnello, a former member of the Italian elite commando frogman force COMSUBIN, otherwise known as Comando Raggruppamento Subacquei e Incursori.”

“This baby has a military background!?”

“Hey, that’s right, you’re the Vongola Decimo. You’re not very bright, are you. But don’t worry, I’ll train you so well you’ll definitely pass the second test.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Colonnello,” Renato said as he rejoined Hisui.

“Hey! Wait! Don’t just ignore my questions!”

Colonnello ignored Tsuna’s ranting and pointed off over the edge of the cliff they were standing on. “You see that whirlpool, maggot? Jump in!”

Tsuna just stared, a look of despair painting his face.

“Pfft. I’m even more powerful than Sinclair,” Colonnello claimed. “If a student doesn’t listen, what do you do, Renato?”

Renato grabbed Tsuna’s arm, twisted, and forced the kid to his knees.

“You’re too soft! This is what I do!” Colonnello launched himself forward and kicked Tsuna in the face.

Leon morphed into a mallet and Renato whacked Tsuna as a reply. After a few more rounds, Tsuna went into full meltdown.

“Jūdaime!”
“Eh?” Tsuna looked around in confusion. “Am I hearing things after all those blows?”

“Maybe if you hurry up with the training bit you’ll still have time for fun,” Renato said.

“Hey!” Colonnello objected. “You just shut up and watch me do my job!”

“Maybe we shouldn’t just watch,” he mused. “After all, Tsuna-kun is our squeak toy…”

Renato nodded, looked at the chibi, and the two of them proceeded to kick Tsuna off the cliff.

“Life isn’t fair,” he muttered, stepping up closer to the edge. “It isn’t kind.”

“No,” Renato said, gazing down at their floundering student, then sent a sharp look his way when he shifted position. “You getting any feelings lately?”

He shook his head. “Not about him specifically. But…”

His lover’s brow furrowed. “But?”

He shrugged. “It’s nebulous. Something might happen today.”

“That’s both reassuring and disturbing.”

“What are you talking about, maggots!?”

Hisui rolled his eyes slightly. Military people sometimes had the worst verbal tics. “Just be on your guard.”

“Weird damn powers,” Colonnello muttered.

“You’re one to talk,” he shot back. “Didn’t mean to rain on your parade or anything.” He dodged a kick and focused on the whirlpool again. “I’m thinking the Olympic Committee would be awarding a two for Tsuna-kun’s water ballet skills.”

“You’re being generous,” Renato replied. “If I wasn’t augmenting the kitten he’d have drowned by now. Release the sharks!” he cried, then dodged a bullet.

“That’s my line, damn it!”

“Kitten,” he called down, “the idea here is to get out of the water and climb the cliff! You know, actually do something to prevent your horrific death? Do you really want to be shark food?”

Two hours later Tsuna had made it back to the top of the cliff, which was amazing to his mind. Even Dino hadn’t done so well at first, but—Dino had not had sharks and death by drowning to motivate him, either. “Good job, kitten,” he said.

“Just … gonna have … a little rest,” Tsuna mumbled, having collapsed in a heap.

“What was that, maggot!?” Colonnello barked, his hawk launching itself into the sky. “You’re not even close to being done! If you’ve got time to lie there and be a whiny little bitch, you’ve got time to train!”

Tsuna lifted his head and stared blearily at the chibi, then noticed the shadow forming around him and looked up. “Hiiiee!” He rolled away and got to his knees as a large rock smashed into the ground where he’d been sprawled.
Hisui looked up to see Colonnello’s hawk hovering high overhead, several more rocks ready to be deployed.

Tsuna darted out of the way as another one smashed down, and then a third, but triggered a pit trap. Still, as he tumbled forward and windmilled his arms in a panic, he managed to catch the opposing edge and prevent himself from falling entirely.

Right about then the subway train schussed to a stop and ejected Hayato and Takeshi. Tsuna got curious enough to manage to haul himself up so he was half way out of the pit, so he could see. Hayato rushed up to pull him the rest of the way free with his usual cry of, “Jūdai!”

“W-what are you doing here?”

Hisui frowned, materialized a senbon, and flicked it at his student before Hayato could reply. “You could try saying ‘thank you’ before demanding answers.”

Tsuna winced. “Thank you, Gokudera-kun.”

“Better.”

Takeshi laughed and scratched the back of his head. “You were taking a really long time, so we went to the reception desk.”

“They said if we took the subway we could meet up with you,” Hayato added.

“You probably really don’t want to be here,” Tsuna said slowly.

“I suppose you can train these two, as well,” Renato said to Colonnello.

“Wow, training?” Takeshi said.

Hayato, on the other hand, looked suspicious. Tsuna got to his feet just as an explosion rocked the island and promptly fell over again, one leg dangling into the pit.

“Enemy attack!” came over a hidden PA system. “Enemy attack! Please proceed to the nearest shelter! We are now entering combat mode!”

“Is some kind of event starting?” Takeshi asked as another explosion shook the island.

Hayato helped Tsuna back up as he said, “Hisui-san, Ren-san, if this place is being attacked…”

“It’s probably the Carcassa Famiglia,” Renato stated. “They are enemies, and they’re stupid enough to do something like this.”

Tsuna yanked at his hair. “Which means a battle is about to break out here!?”

“Kitten, the battle has already started,” he pointed out, as Colonnello’s pacifier started to glow.

“One of—”

Renato nodded. “Then it would have to be Skull, don’t you think?”

“This isn’t good,” Colonnello said. “The famiglia assigned to island security today went back to the mainland for the anniversary of their capo’s death.”

“No way…” Hayato breathed.
“What do we do!?” Tsuna said.

“Of course, as long as I’m around, I won’t let them have their way,” Colonnello declared. “Except… It’s time for my nap.” He promptly fell asleep.

“Damn—” Renato scrubbed his face with one hand, muffling part of what he said. “—sleep cycle. Just ignore Colonnello. You should be more worried about Mama and the others, kitten. We can take the subway back to—”

Tsuna had already taken off, his two friends in tow. They reached the train and got on, and only then noticed that none of the lights were on. He and Renato blended into the foliage, and he watched as the boys looked back to realize that the two of them were no longer there, panic briefly, and jump back out so they could dash off along the tracks.

“Huh,” he said. “I guess a threat to his mother is enough to get him moving of his own volition.”

“I already know she’ll be fine,” Renato replied. “You’d have told me otherwise. But, well, let’s go. If Skull is attacking…”

“He’ll have that stupid octopus with him.”

They got back to the main part of the island well before the three boys and settled in high up to watch. He could see Nana and Bianchi ushering the kids toward where resort workers would have directed them, that being Mafia Castle. Haru had taken the lead, and the little ones were in the middle. Half the attractions had been blown to smithereens, but the castle itself was untouched. Unfortunately, the most Tsuna was going to be able to enjoy was the beach, and even that was doubtful.

Tsuna emerged from the subway tunnel into sunlight and was noticed by Nana, though she and the others continued on into the castle quickly enough. It was then that various famiglie started to argue about who should take charge of the defense, among them the Difo, Beccio, and Nuevo, and the argument began to get heated.

“If you need someone at the helm,” Hayato interrupted, “our boss is perfect for the job!” When the scores of adults objected to the fluffy kitten he snarled, “Got a problem with the Vongola!?”

Renato set up a sniper rifle and sighted as Carcassa forces stormed the area. Takeshi was having a grand time from the looks of it dodging bullets while Tsuna ran around in shrieking circles. Everyone else actually fought, either with dynamite (Hayato) or guns. And then Skull showed up in his signature leather and motorcycle helmet, a purple pacifier hanging from around his neck.

“It’s the Carcassa Famiglia’s strategist, Skull!”

Renato snorted. “I don’t remember much from those jobs, but even I know Skull is a lackey.”

“What? That little shrimp?” Tsuna said.

“You’d think he’d have learned by now that size means nothing,” he commented in annoyance.

“No doubt about it,” that same mafioso said. “The purple pacifier is a sign of an Arcobaleno.”

“Arcobaleno?” Tsuna asked.

“Arcobaleno means rainbow,” the man said, “and it refers to the seven strongest infants in the mafia world.”
“There are seven of them!?”

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll take them out,” Hayato promised, dynamite at the ready.

“At least one of them is doing something,” he muttered. “Eh, or trying.”

“There’s something behind him! An octopus!” Tsuna cried, after the smoke from Hayato’s failed attack cleared.

“I just know Skull is getting off on this, listening to them talk,” Renato said quietly, “so he can bask in their fear. What a dork.”

“I’ve heard that Skull controls that giant armored octopus, its actions linked to the infant’s finger movements.”

“Amazing!” Takeshi breathed. “But how?”

“Now is not the time to be impressed,” Tsuna snapped.

“Well? Who’s next?” Skull asked, wiggling his fingers and directing his companion to sweep away a good dozen or more mafiosi.

“How about you?” Renato muttered toward the tiny figure. “Can you give me a vocal boost?”

“Sure,” he replied, and cast a diffusive amplifier on his lover.

“Yo, Skull!” Renato shouted. “Haven’t you eaten that thing yet? It’s probably damn tasty. Maybe I should buy you a drink to go with some tako sashimi.”

Skull jerked and tried to figure out where the voice had come from. “Don’t be ridiculous! I will waste this damn island. I’m acting under the orders of the Carcassa Capo! You are all enemies I must defeat.”

Renato made a cutting motion across his throat and Hisui obliged by removing the spell. His lover fired, twice, then stowed the sniper rifle and launched himself. Hisui followed his lover down from their perch, making sure to cushion their landing.

“Die!” Skull shouted, and moved his hands.

“What a shame,” Renato said mock sadly. “Your portable sashimi source can’t understand your commands any longer.”

“Oh,” Tsuna said quietly, “I get it.”

Skull twitched—which was still a better expression of panic than Tsuna could manage—and said, “In that case, I’ll order the fleet to bombard the castle!”

“Not happening,” Hisui said, glancing up. “Colonnello just arrived, and you’re messing with his turf. While you’re watching your plans go up in smoke, could I interest you in some acupuncture?”

Indeed, Colonnello’s hawk companion had flown the Rain Arcobaleno out into position, and the chibi quickly blew to pieces the ships that had been firing on the island.

“Skull-sama,” was heard from Skull’s helmet, “all ships have been sunk!”

Tsuna sighed, then scowled. “Why didn’t you guys get here sooner!”
Hisui moved over to lay a hand on the back of Tsuna’s neck and squeeze. “Again with the yelling,” he whispered. “And what do you care? You weren’t fighting in the first place. No, you were flailing around in a panic, but good job dodging all those bullets, kitten.” He wondered if it was the famed intuition of the Vongola at work.

“So, Skull,” Renato said, “you were planning to destroy the castle with what, exactly?”

Huge hands or not, Skull knew when it was time to flee.

“You’re just … going to let him go?” Tsuna asked.

“Kitten, we’re just visitors,” he explained. “The attacking force has been driven off. Nana-chan and the kids are safe, and that’s all we needed to ensure. If you wanted a different result, perhaps you should have done something? You don’t get to complain about the outcome if you refuse to actually stir yourself to action.”

“I—”

“I suggest you go find your mother, kitten. She’ll be wanting to know that you’re all right.” He gave the kid a little nudge. “Let the people who gave a damn about our safety deal with the aftermath.”

It was on the trip back home that Tsuna found him as he was staring at the ocean. The boy leaned on the railing next to him and said, “Why do you call me kitten?”

“Do you know what newborn kittens are like?”

Tsuna made a frustrated sound at the redirect. “No.”

“Newborn kittens are blind and deaf. They don’t have much of a sense of smell, either. They rely on their mother to feed them, keep them warm, and protect them. By their second week their eyes start to open and they begin to gain a sense of smell. By the third week their ears start being useful and they recognize their litter mates as something more than warmth. Fourth week, they can see much better, start to explore, take care of themselves, and their hearing develops. Fifth week? Well, I think you might be getting the picture here. Or…?”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Well, there you go. You can spend your whole life denying reality, willfully being a kitten. Blind, deaf, unaware, ignoring the fact that there’s an old man out there grieving the deaths of three of his sons and was left with no choice but to choose you as his heir. But that won’t stop the enemies of the Vongola from coming after you, your family, your friends, whoever gets in the way … and slaughtering every last one of you. Do you want to be a kitten, or a man?” With that he walked away.

The second Kyoko was out of sight Tsuna thrust his arms up in the air. “Yes! I’m in the same class as Kyoko-chan, and I get to research our old childhood dreams with her!”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought, exchanging a look with Renato, ‘he looks like he just won a damn medal.’

“Oh, so she’s to be the future wife of the tenth?”

Tsuna froze, then dropped his arms and looked around wildly. “Who is it? Huh? Was I just hearing things?”
“What a pretty girl.”

“Hiiee! There is someone! Who is it!?” Tsuna was crushed to the pavement seconds later by an airborne sphere coming to rest.

“Good day, Decimo! I’m one of the Vongola Famiglia’s specialized weapon tuners! My name is Giannini.”

“Another weirdo?”

Renato stepped out of concealment and approached. “You’re Giannichi’s son?”

“Oh, good day, Sinclair. Thank you for taking care of my father.”

“This is rare, for a weapon tuner to leave Italy.”

“Yes,” Giannini replied. “Weapon modification for overseas famiglia members has become an emergency priority under Nono’s orders.”

“We’ve heard about it. This is to counter the recent assassination attempts on mafia leaders and their successors, right?”

“Correct.”

“What!?” Tsuna left off whining about his hurts to get upset for an entirely different reason. “Hey, wait! Then … that means I’m in danger, too?”

“Of course it does,” Renato said with a sigh.

“No way! You have to do something!”

“Always with the yelling,” he said, stepping out of concealment.

Tsuna looked vaguely ashamed for a moment, then said, in a normal tone, “How much longer are you going to squish me?”

“Oh! Sorry,” Giannini said apologetically, then worked the controls on his odd little conveyance to rise up a little.

Shortly thereafter they were inside the house. “What does Giannichi think about the recent assassinations?” Renato asked.

“My father believes they’ve been occurring because a famiglia has perfected optical camouflage technology and…”

Hisui watched as Tsuna clapped his hands over his ears and started shaking his head. ‘Still not ready to be a man, eh?’ The kitten raced off to his room. A shriek was heard moments later.

“Oh, he must have found the stuff I unpacked,” Giannini said, then zoomed off upstairs.

‘Poor kitten,’ he thought, as Hayato burst into the house and dashed upstairs. ‘His lovely time with his crush has just been … crushed.’ Lambo joined in, asking for his bazooka to be “tuned”, and Giannini practically wet himself on seeing it—or at least that was the impression Hisui got.

“You guys can use my room,” Tsuna shouted after having yet another panic attack. “But you can’t come into the kitchen! I have something very important I need to do there!”
“All right,” Hayato said carefully as Tsuna fled off downstairs.

Considering he was the only one who generally never used a weapon (he did not think that firing Dying Will Bullets on occasion counted), he was the one to shadow off behind Tsuna to supervise. ‘Which really means I want to see how much of a fool he makes of himself,’ he admitted. ‘I really need to do another job soon. The amount of idiocy around here makes me feel violent.’

It wasn’t long before Hayato came down to show off his modified dynamite. A part of him badly wanted to ask just how it could be modified, aside from … exploding more? But he restrained himself and simply watched. When Hayato set it off it was like someone threw a party—possibly a wedding party, given the doves that appeared and flew away. The anticipatory smile on Hayato’s face turned brittle and the pink of humiliation and anger dusted his cheeks. “I need to have a talk with Giannini,” he growled before storming off.

Next down was Renato, though he had serious issues with the belief that his lover would let just anyone touch his weapons. “Chaos, Kyoko,” Renato greeted.

“What are you here? Go back to my room,” Tsuna pleaded.

“No. I wanted you to see a modified Dying Will Bullet,” Renato replied, revealing his gun.

“No, wait! Kyoko-chan is here!” Tsuna flailed his hands around uselessly. “Don’t shoot!”

“Die.” Renato fired, only for the bullet to travel all of six inches before plopping to the floor. The gun went away and they all stared at the bullet, which was wriggling around of its own volition. His lover picked it up, stared at it some more as it rolled around in his hand, then said, “I believe I’ll be having a discussion with Giannini,” before departing.

Less than a minute later they heard a frightened scream. Tsuna shot up from his chair and fled upstairs. Several minutes after that—and plenty of noise that caused Kyoko to keep looking at the ceiling with an air of bemusement—a chibi version of Hayato appeared.

“So cute!” Kyoko said as she slipped out of her chair and crouched down in front of Hayato. “Were you playing with Lambo-kun?”

A look of shock passed over Hayato’s face before it turned to something closer to anger. “What did you say!? Don’t look down on me, woman! I’ll blow you and your brother up!”

Tsuna dashed in and snatched Hayato up. “Hey, wait! Let’s talk over there.”

The anger bled away to surprise. “Wow, Jūdai, you’re suddenly so strong!” As Tsuna carried him away from Kyoko he noticed something out the window. “Oh, there are some weird guys on the telephone pole outside!” he said and pointed.

His brow went up. A look out the window showed nothing in particular, but Hayato was not prone to lies or flights of fancy, so he ignored the argument going on and cast out a gravitational net. Hayato was right; two people were clinging to the telephone pole. He tapped his earpiece as Hayato struggled free from Tsuna’s hold and brought out an array of dynamite.

“Don’t take out dangerous stuff like that!”

“I’m going to go blow up the guys on the pole,” Hayato insisted. He was nearly at the door when Takeshi wandered in.

While the three of them were arguing Renato came downstairs to see why he’d been summoned.
Hisui pulled him aside and whispered into his ear. “Two unknowns, optical camouflage, on the telephone pole out there. Hayato-kun can see them, but no one else can. Eh, actually, they’re moving. Takeshi-kun left the door open…”

Renato nodded and examined his “modified” Dying Will Bullet again, which was moving around like a damn inchworm in his hand.

Hayato finally realized that he’d been chibified and freaked out, then freaked out a second time and went for his weapons.

The unknowns were inside, clinging to the ceiling. “It’s damn frustrating not to be able to see this with my eyes,” he whispered.

Takeshi tried to divest Hayato of his cigarette and failed, and the chibi got off his attack—of party streamers, confetti, and doves. Hayato’s eyes went wide and his jaw clenched.

Renato whispered back, “Pretty sure it was Verde who designed whatever it is they’re using. That would make sense given that he would want to remain unaffected by whatever manner of optical camouflage he came up with.”

They watched as Hayato got a crafty look on his face and asked Takeshi—who still did not recognize him—to teach him to play catch, then positioned himself just so. The first pitch hit one of the two unknowns and Hayato immediately tossed the ball back and asked for a second try, that time jumping up in front of the second unknown.

The impact broke the suits the two were wearing, rendering them visible. “Damn it, we’ve been found out!”

“Good job, Hayato,” Renato praised. “Excellent tactics.”

Tsuna finally bought a clue and realized the two were assassins there to kill him, and went into a meltdown.

“Since we’ve already been discovered,” the shorter assassin said as they both pulled out guns, “we’ll just kill him directly!”

“Ren-san, help!”

Renato shrugged. “I can’t do anything,” he said, holding out his hand palm up. “My weapons are useless. Look. This bullet is dancing!”

The larger assassin kicked Hayato across the room and stuck his gun in Tsuna’s face. The bullet stopped dancing and shot off on its own, to nail Tsuna in the forehead.

“Interesting,” he commented as Tsuna died, revived, and proceeded to kick the crap out of the two assassins. “It makes no damn sense, but interesting.”

“Go back and give my regards to your boss,” Tsuna said, the flame on his forehead sputtering out.

Renato and Hisui each took an assassin and dragged them away, out of sight, so that Hisui could “dispose” of them.

When he returned from dumping the two in a grotty Tokyo alley, he snatched up Hayato and walked off with him, ignoring the outraged struggling. “Stop that and think,” he said quietly. “You’re in a small child’s body right now. Do you really think people aren’t going to haul off a strange,
“European-featured child to the police station in an attempt to find his parents?”

Hayato stilled in his arms. “Good point.”

“Yes. It’s been so far beyond five minutes that I’d rather you stayed with us until you return to normal. I’ll contact the school and let them know you’re sick, if necessary. We also need to get you new dynamite.”

Hayato snarled and shook a tiny fist. “That bastard!”

“I’m sure Ren-kun will beat some sense into him, and hopefully he’ll go back and get more lessons from his father. Hayato-kun, I’m proud of you.”

The boy blushed.

“You saw the assassins and, despite people saying you were seeing things, you persevered. You even came up with a viable plan to expose them with what resources you had on hand, so that everyone could see the danger, so that people could react. From what I understand those two managed to take out a lot of people with those suits. You did well.”

“Shouldn’t they have, you know, waited until later, when Jūdai was asleep and unprotected?”

He shrugged. “I can only assume that they were so pumped up over earlier successes that they got overconfident. Or maybe they wanted the thrill of sneaking in with so many people around, to prove they could do it again. We may never know. But we do know that people are aware of Tsuna-kun’s status and location.”

It took a week for Hayato to go back to normal. It took a week for Tsuna to come to him to talk. “So, I guess I’m in danger.”

He nodded.

“I’m probably not going to be able to get away from this.”

His brow went up.

“I’m still not all that good at school.”

“You don’t have to be blindingly intelligent, kitten, but you do have to try. If nothing else, trying at things helps you to know where your limits are, or could be. Maybe your strengths aren’t in mathematics or chemistry. So what? It still helps to have a basic understanding. You’re not stupid. You got right away what Ren-kun did against Skull, before anyone else seemed to. That’s not nothing.”

“What are you good at? In the normal world, I mean.”

“Languages. I am exceptional at languages.”

Tsuna’s brow furrowed. “But what do you do with them?”

He blinked. “Translation work, kitten. Being fluent in multiple languages is a valuable skill. I have a contract with a publishing house, as an example. Say for instance that some book gets written over in Germany and they want it here in Japanese. I’m one of the people who does the translations for things like that.”

“People get paid for that?” Tsuna looked bewildered for some reason.
“Of course. Someone has to do it, and it’s still a job. It’s exacting work. It pays well.”

“Then why don’t you just do that?”

He smiled slightly. “Because I like getting psychos that the police can’t handle or even find off the streets. We’re getting off topic, though. School isn’t the sum of your life, or where you learn everything. Sometimes it’s something as simple as walking out the front door in the morning and realizing that there are people waiting for you, to walk beside you, when you learn something. That doesn’t mean we aren’t going to do our best to pound knowledge into your head. And soon, physical things, because one of the most important bases you can have is stamina. Stamina plus resolve will get you places you never dreamed you could reach.”

“Okay.”

His brow crinkled faintly. Was that assent? A lack of denial? Of rebellion?

“My mother might have been there, a week ago. So okay.”

He nodded. “After school, come here. You’ll be home in time for dinner every day, and have time in the evenings for homework if it’s not already done. Weekends off, unless something comes up.”

Tsuna nodded and left.

When he came back, after school on Monday, Hisui ran him into the ground for two hours, just as he used to do with Dino. He was allowed to slow down to a walk so he could take in water or a sports drink every so often. “You’ve got one thing on Dino-kun, kitten.”

“What’s that?” Tsuna gasped, his face red from exertion and sweat dampening everything.

“You’re not clumsy the way he is. You lack coordination, yes, but that can be trained into you. He’s inherently clumsy in normal life.”

Tsuna gaped. “Have you not seen me in P.E. class?”

“Oh, of course I have. And I also know that you’ve spent a lot of time trying to withstand the bullying, and that every effort was met with scorn. You gave up, you stopped trying. I won’t allow that, though. You try, and you keep trying, until you realize that you can do it. Because we know you can. For all that we tease you and give you a hard time, we wouldn’t bother if we thought it was hopeless, if we thought you were hopeless.

“Also, don’t mistake things. The coordination and reflexes necessary for, say, surgery are not the same as those for a baseball player. Some people do well with a sword, some with a gun, some with just their hands. What matters is what you’re good at, not what someone else is good at. Now, you’ve had your break, so back to running.”

Renato had him for the second two hours, when Tsuna’s body was convinced it was dying, to etch knowledge into the boy’s head, like acid on metal, though not so damaging. They started speaking to him in Italian, getting him to learn through immersion, so that his frustration at his inability to communicate would spur him on. There was a great deal of pointing and pleading looks, answered by the Italian word for something.

Over the weeks leading up to summer break Tsuna had learned some patience, how to stop and listen, how to try to puzzle things out. He learned how to pace himself. He learned ways to retain information, even if he remained abysmal at certain subjects. He learned that he was not hopeless. He still freaked out too often for comfort.
“I’ll meet you there,” Renato said.

Hisui gave him a kiss and headed out to the community center to ensure things were ready. Not long after he arrived the others showed up, that being Hayato, Takeshi, Ryohei, Haru, Lambo, and I-Pin. A short time later Renato came in, followed by Tsuna a minute after.

“Ren-san!” Tsuna said as he burst in through the doors.

“Hey, Tsuna-kun,” Takeshi greeted.

“…Everyone’s here? What are you all doing here? What’s with this unusual atmosphere?”

“Of course they’d feel a bit different today,” Renato said. “Today is the Vongola-style community relationship-building Tanabata contest.”

“What the hell is that?” Tsuna muttered as he walked up to the front of the room.

He sighed. “Everyone performs something to do with Tanabata, the judges review it, and then we see who gets the highest score,” he said, pointing at the scoreboard, which looked suspiciously like the one they had used for the Vongola-style birthday party. “The person with the highest score gets the wish they wrote on their tanzuku.”

Tsuna looked at Renato. “That’s why you took mine away? Forget it, just give it back to me! It’s fine even if it doesn’t come true. I’m not interested in joining superstitious games like these!”

“It’s not superstition,” Renato said. “Because of the considerable influence of the Vongola, the success rate of the wishes has been one hundred percent. In the past, people have become kings, and one even became the first man on the moon.”

Tsuna looked at how excited the others were, then adopted a dreamy look, and Hisui just knew the wish had to do with Kyoko. “I—I can get mine, too?”

“It’s simple,” he said. “So long as you can make these judges happy.” ‘Though really, maybe at some point you’ll wake the hell up and realize that working for these things personally is a better choice.’

Tsuna spun around and noticed that all the seating had been filled with the neighborhood elderly.

“For the mafia,” Renato said, “communication with the elderly is indispensable. No matter which country it is, the local elderly are important supporters. Without their trust, it’s over. And, Tsuna… You’ve already signed up. If you try to forfeit now, according to the rules, no matter where on Earth you try to run to, we’ll stop your dreams from coming true.”

Either Tsuna actually believed that, or the evil smile on Renato’s face scared him, because the kitten freaked out. “…I do want my wish to come true, but I didn’t prepare anything,” he said mournfully.

“You can relax, Jūdaime,” Hayato reassured him. “I’ve got it all ready! So just relax. Let’s win this contest and get our wishes fulfilled.”

“Then Goku—”

Renato cleared his throat loudly. “Now, the Vongola-style Tanabata contest is about to start!”
Haru hopped up onto the stage and faced the audience. “The M.C. for this event is going to be Miura Haru of Third Street. Everyone, if you feel that a performance is suitable for Tanabata, then please raise the fan in your hand. The total will be noted on the board for each entry. The first performer is the Namimori baseball team’s hope, Yamamoto Takeshi-san. His wish is to ‘get into the quarter-finals for the district tournament’.”

He noticed Tsuna freak out again at the realization that his wish would be broadcast to the room.

Takeshi got up on stage and started juggling. “I’m going to use balls that symbolize the stars to show the Milky Way.”

The crowd seemed entertained, enough that Hayato muttered, “Oh, this is bad. It’s more popular than I thought it’d be,” then called out, “Yamamoto-kun, pass one of those balls here!”

“He’s not going to fall for that,” Tsuna commented.

Takeshi’s smile disappeared and his expression went to one of focus. “Watch this!” He drew back and threw, lodging one of the spiked balls into the wall between Hayato and Tsuna, cracking the plaster.

“You shouldn’t use violence,” an old man said disapprovingly.

“You can’t destroy public property,” added an old woman.

Takeshi smiled sheepishly and scratched the back of his neck. “Whoops, sorry. Oh, right. Dad wanted me to give out some Tanabata sushi to everyone. Don’t forget to bring some home when you go.”

Most of the crowd did a one-eighty when they realized who Takeshi was and flung their fans up in approval.

“Seventy points,” Renato said, “not bad.”

Hisui slapped a chibi-Takeshi magnetic sticker in place.

“Up next is the extreme boxer, Sasagawa Ryohei-san, and the Bovino family’s little grown-up, Lambo-kun. Please welcome them to the stage!”

Both were dressed a bit differently than normal, he noted.

“I want boxing to become a national sport!” Ryohei bellowed, thrusting one fist into the air.

“I want to rule the world!” Lambo cried, putting on an evil face.

“So cute,” and “What could it be?” and “Probably the story of the cowherd and the weaver,” drifted up from the audience.

“Of course not!” Ryohei denied. “You all guessed wrong!” The two removed their yukatas and flung them aside.

“Lambo-san is a panda!” Lambo declared, holding a piece of bamboo up to his mouth. “Lambo-san will give it his all and eat bamboo!” He was wearing a panda costume, but had not bothered to remove his horns.

“I’m a koala, eating eucalyptus leaves!” Ryohei proclaimed, looking almost adorable in his koala costume.
Two fans slowly rose up in the audience.

“Two points,” Renato announced.

Ryohei and Lambo fumbled their way off stage, with stomach complaints, and Haru announced, “Next up is cute I-Pin-chan, who wants to see her teacher again. She’s a little nervous, though.”

‘So Fon isn’t in town, or he’s hiding,’ he thought.

Everyone in the audience stood up to bow. “It’s the bodhisattva of the land…” and “That’s great,” could be heard.

Tsuna freaked out as soon as pinzu appeared on I-Pin’s forehead. “Danger!” He rushed forward and snatched her up, then flung her out the window, as high as he could manage.

“Beautiful fireworks!” and “Amazing!” were heard as the girl exploded.

“I-Pin received ninety-five points,” Renato reported.

“And,” Haru said, “the last performance is by the golden pair of Gokudera Hayato-san and Sawada Tsunayoshi-san. Their wish is to—”

“Whoa, wait!” Tsuna cried in a panic.

Hayato snatched the papers from her hand and crushed them. “Don’t be in such a hurry to read them. I want to give someone a surprise. So, when you think of a two-person performance, you think of the kind of magic tricks you do at parties. But I’m not dumb enough to try the same trick twice. Today is the seventh of July, so…”

Hayato produced a scandalous number of knives in his hands. “I’m going to throw seventy-seven knives.”

“You’re going to throw them at me?” Tsuna asked, eyes wide with fear and sweat already trickling down his face.

“Dodge well, okay!”

“You’ve got to be kidding! It’s not possible!” Tsuna said as he prepared to flee.

“What, you’re going to give up?” Renato asked mockingly.

“I could die! There’s no need for me to lose my life for something like building community relations!”

“Oh, see, that was the wrong thing to say, kitten,” Renato said darkly. “All there is for people who don’t take community relations seriously … is death.”

Tsuna was not expecting the bullet to come from Hisui; he was too busy staring at Renato. Tsuna hit the floor, popped back up, and yelled, “Reborn! Perform with my Dying Will! Okay!” Tsuna reached out and yanked a discarded yukata off the ground and slipped into it, then “borrowed” the baseball bat Yamamoto carried around. “I am … samurai Tsuna! Go ahead and toss them!”

“Oh, Jūdaime!” Hayato said happily. “Here they come!”

‘What the hell is he thinking?’ he wondered, and watched as Tsuna deflected every knife off to either side, where they fell harmlessly.
The crowd went wild for the performance and voted unanimously.

“Well,” Haru said once it was over. “Let’s have the awards ceremony. The winners, Gokudera-san and Sawada-san, will have their wishes fulfilled by Ren-san.”

Renato smirked and stepped up to the stage. “Hayato’s dream is ‘to become Tsuna’s right-hand man’, so have this.” He reached over into a box and pulled out something puffy and large, then tossed it at Hayato.

“What’s this?”

“A sleeping bag that represents Tsuna’s right hand,” Renato revealed. “Next is Tsuna’s wish.”

“Hiiiie! Don’t say it in front of everyone! This is embarrassing!”

Renato smiled, and it was not innocent. “I knew this would happen, so I already told Nono that you had another wish,” he said softly, then more loudly, “Tsuna’s wish is to ‘become a good Jūdai State for the Vongola’. Nono was so happy he cried, and said he’d definitely fulfill it for you.”

Tsuna crumpled to his knees, torn between relief and panic.

Hisui fed the messenger bird some treats as Renato investigated the parcel it had brought them from Nono. There was a Sky Flame-sealed letter and a Sky Flame-sealed package inside the outer wrappings. Renato opened the letter and held it between them.

Nono was informing them that a breakout had occurred at Vindicare. Eight people had broken out, including Rokudo Mukuro, formerly of the Serpente Famiglia and responsible for its utter destruction.

“Wonderful,” he muttered. “And what are the odds that this bunch will show up on our doorstep?”

“After having already had assassins come after Tsuna? Pretty damn good.”

“And why the hell do half this bunch of presumed Italians all have Japanese names? I kind of get it in the case of Hayato-kun. He ran, so it’s only natural he’d have taken the name his mother gave him. But these people? Maybe we should take that as a huge clue that they do, in fact, intend to come here?”

“Maybe they’re so bored in Vindicare that they hold classes in there amongst the inmates not in the Water Prison, to do something with their time? It may very well be teaching each other their respective languages and culture.” Renato shrugged.

“So this package has a weapon for Tsuna?”

Renato set down the letter and opened that instead. Inside was a set of … wool gloves? “What the hell?”

He looked back at the letter again and kept reading. “Says here that given Tsuna-kun’s striking resemblance to Primo and our reports on how he chooses to deal with his opponents while in Dying Will Mode, he had Giannichi devise a set of gloves for the kitten, based on Primo’s.”

“Well at least it wasn’t a damn fork,” Renato said. “Yeah, sure, let’s all be scared of the Vongola Quarto, Forksassin.”
He snorted in amusement and said, “Well, Tsuna-kun is Primo’s direct ancestor, unlike Nono. It’s a
good a weapon as any I suppose, though I could have wished for them to be in bracelet form so he
could wear them all the time. Kid’s going to be embarrassed carrying these around stuffed in a
pocket or on a string around his neck or something.”

“I could wish that none of it was needed, but it’s not so simple for certain types. It’s almost like how
wizards need wands.”

He frowned and examined the gloves. Were they made of some special substance that started out
innocuous, but transformed? He did not dare do anything to them, though he would prefer to. Runes,
perhaps, to ensure recall abilities, but without knowing what they were… He blinked when Leon
struck with his tongue and stole the gloves—though they were more like mittens—and swallowed
them.

Renato eyed his pet. “Right. That’s bad.”

“They’re definitely coming here.”

“Yeah. And whatever Giannichi came up with wasn’t good enough for our little friend here.”

“Think we should give Shamal a heads up in case he wanders back this way?”

Renato eyed Leon again and nodded slightly. “I’ll send him a message, just in case.”
They were having breakfast at Nana’s house when the subject of the recent attacks came up, with Nana asking, “Is there something wrong at Nami Middle? There was another assault case, wasn’t there?”

Tsuna turned his focus away from the refrigerator to aim a bleary look at his mother. “What?”

Renato set down his coffee cup and said, “I’m surprised you hadn’t heard, kitten. Eight prefects from Nami Middle were found with serious injuries last weekend. And, for some reason, all of them had teeth extracted. One boy was missing all of his.”

Tsuna had a freak-out half way to the table with his drink. “Eh!? For real!?” As he sat down he added, “Why would anyone do something like that?”

“No idea,” he lied. True, they were unaware of the exact details, but they assumed it had to be the Vendicare escapees causing trouble.

“Hey, Tsu-kun,” Nana said, “maybe you should learn some hand-to-hand fighting skill for defense?”

“What!? Why would I have to do something like that!?”

“Because I’m worried!” she said with uncharacteristic sharpness. “You should learn to protect yourself! Besides, a man needs to be strong, too, right?”

“Absolutely,” Renato said.

“Don’t agree with her! Besides, this has nothing to do with me. This is a fight between gangsters! The victims have all only been prefects, right?”

He sighed, but he had not really expected a different reaction from the kid. It had not touched Tsuna’s family or friends, so naturally he made the assumption that he was divorced from the situation.

They both walked their student to school. The attacks had begun in the evenings, but some of the victims had been targeted during the day. Nono had also asked them to step up their vigilance after reading the most recent report they’d submitted, but not to interfere directly unless they had to.

Renato handed over a sheaf of flyers to Tsuna with a smirk. “If Fūta was here, he could come up with a list of the best fighting styles to suit you.”

Tsuna opened his mouth to respond, but snapped it shut on seeing so many prefects out on the streets. He looked around before saying, “It’s the prefects. Over there, too.”

“Considering just how many of the victims have been prefects,” he said, “is it any wonder they’re a bit jittery?”

“This really is a gang fight or something,” Tsuna said obliviously.

“You’re wrong,” came an aloof voice.

“Hibari-san!”
“Chaos,” Renato greeted.

“Ano… I was just on my way to school…” Tsuna’s hands had gone up in a surrender posture.

“This is mischief with no meaning,” Hibari said coolly. “But of course, these sparks which have ignited must be severed from their origin.”

As Tsuna slid into another meltdown, the Nami Middle school song started to play, and Hibari brought his phone out, woke it, and held it to his ear.

“We—we’ll be running along now,” Tsuna said nervously, “to school.”

“He’s an acquaintance of yours,” Hibari said to Tsuna’s retreating form, “isn’t he? Sasagawa Ryohei … was attacked.”

Tsuna’s eyes went wide, then he took off in the direction of the hospital.

Hisui nodded a thanks to Hibari and followed, putting his earpiece into place. Tsuna was a speedy little thing when he was motivated, and got to the hospital in record time. After getting the room number for Ryohei the kid dashed upstairs and burst into the room. “Sasagawa-san! Are you all right!”

Ryohei was stretched out on a bed, covered in bandages and casts. “Sawada-san,” he said, his voice muffled by the mask covering his nose and mouth, “you’re quick. I look really pathetic like this.”

“How are your injuries?” he asked, itching to do something to help, even if it would be seen as miraculous healing.

“Six broken bones, seven cracked, and…” Ryohei reached up with his unbroken arm and pulled the mask away. “Look,” he said, then smiled widely, revealing gaps. “I lost five of my teeth.”

Predictably, Tsuna freaked out.

“Having said that,” Ryohei added, “I’ve broken more bones and teeth during boxing. But, the guy who came looking for a fight… Although he appeared careless, he probably really is a strong guy…”

Tsuna snapped back to attention, remarkably. “Eh? You saw the attacker!?”

“Yup. He even knew my name. He wore a Kokuyo Middle uniform, from the next town over… Sawada-san, you be careful.”

“You’re saying that, too!? This has nothing to do with me!”

Hisui slipped out into the hallway to think, then activated his earpiece and said, “Ryohei-kun is missing five teeth.”

“Either he put up a better fight, the attacker or attackers is getting tired, or…”

“Yeah.” He nodded absentely as Kyoko dashed by on her way to her brother’s room. “All males.”

“I’m almost there, by the way.”

“Third floor.”

“All right. Hibari took off with a rather purposeful air.”
He sighed, then looked over at fresh movement to see Tsuna emerging.

“Why did Sasagawa-san get beaten up!? What on Earth is going on!?”

“Stop pulling your hair like that,” he said irritably, “and stop yelling. You’re not the only one in a panic.” He gestured at the other students clustered on the floor.

One of them approached. “Oh, it’s Dame-Tsuna. Things are really bad.”

“What’s happened? Who are you visiting here?”

“Ah… It’s a senpai from my club. Mochida-san was attacked. And that’s not all. Since last night, five third years, four second years, and two first years, none of them prefects, were attacked.”

He sighed. He was going to have to try harder to stop Tsuna from going into meltdown so damn often. It made him tired just witnessing it so often. Renato slid into a spot next to him, so he tapped his earpiece. “You heard?” he said quietly.

“Yeah. And the poor boy only just got his hair back to looking semi-normal, too,” Renato replied. “You seen Fūta recently?”

He paused to think back and frowned. “No, actually. I didn’t expect to since Tsuna-kun’s been coming to the house in the afternoons, but… Now that you mention it, he wasn’t there this morning, and he should have been.”

“You said Ryohei lost five teeth?”

“Yes. So, the rankings?”

“I’m thinking so.”

A hush broke out on the floor. Hisui checked and saw two prefects had arrived and every student was bowing.

“It’s the head prefect’s second in command, Kusakabe-san,” someone hissed.

“So, nobody’s seen any sign of the head?” Kusakabe said.

His companion snorted quietly. “Yeah. Like always, he’s probably gone after the enemy’s trail. So, really, it’s only a matter of time before the culprits are totally annihilated,” he said, voice getting softer as the two of them went toward the stairwell.

“I see.”

Something hit the floor, just barely heard amongst the rising swell of voices rejoicing at the idea of Hibari taking care of things.

Renato crouched long enough to pick up Leon’s tail. “Well, that pretty much says it all.”

“Ew, that’s gross,” Tsuna said, having turned his attention their way. “But wait, do chameleons lose their tails?”

He knocked his head back against the wall gently. The kid was so ignorant.

“When this happens,” Renato said ominously, “it’s an unlucky sign.”
He looked up to see that Leon had started changing shapes in an uncontrolled manner. The same thing had happened during their tenure as Dino’s tutors.

“Is he all right?” Tsuna asked.

“Once he loses his tail he can’t control his shape-changing ability,” Renato said. “It’s—”

“Make way!” someone shouted.

Every head in the room turned toward the sound to see a prefect being wheeled in on a gurney by two orderlies. Even mostly covered in a sheet, the person’s hairstyle was unmistakable. Hisui “reached” out to pry open Kusakabe’s mouth enough to see inside.

“Four of them,” Renato said. “There can be no doubt about it.”

“What are you talking about?” Tsuna asked.

“The cause of all this fighting is you, Tsuna-kun,” he said. “Kusakabe-san lost four teeth, Ryohei-kun lost five.”

“Before Ryohei was Moriyama. He lost six. Oshikiri before that lost seven. Yokomine lost eight. Do I have to keep going?” Renato asked. “The first person to get beaten lost all twenty-four teeth. It’s a countdown.” He pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and showed it to Tsuna. “Once I realized there was a countdown, I found a correlation.”

“Namimori Middle’s fighting strength ranking? Eh…? What about it…?”

He rolled his eyes. “Tsuna-kun, please try to remember you have a brain and use it?”

“The order of the victims matches the ranking list,” Renato said slowly. “Fūta’s ranking list.”

“I don’t get it,” Tsuna said. “What is going on?”

“The mafia has a code, the Omertà. It’s a code that says under no circumstances should a person reveal the secrets of his organization. Fūta’s ranking lists are the entire industry’s top secret. There’s no way an ordinary person would have access to it. In other words, to get access to this ranking list means—”

“Ah!” Tsuna said, and for a moment there Hisui thought the kid finally saw. “Since the fourth-ranked Kusakabe-san was beaten, then the third-ranked would be targeted next!”

‘Yes,’ he thought, ‘but also that Fūta must be a prisoner, and there’s a mafia connection here.’

“Wh-what should we do?”

Renato stared at the kitten. “You go deal with it. I need to check out something that’s bothering me.”

Tsuna flung the list at them and ran. Hisui glanced at it long enough to get the information he needed, then tucked it away and followed. He disillusioned himself as soon as he could, and shadowed Tsuna on his flight. Along the way the kitten was caught in a net by Haru.

“We did it!” she cried happily. “Tsuna-san secured!” Lambo and I-Pin jumped up and down, flushed with success.

“You three!” Tsuna cried. “What are you doing!?”
“Haru heard lots of students in your school got targeted, and it’s getting dangerous,” she said earnestly. “Haru thought that if we got Tsuna-san before the villains did, we could save you!”

“That makes no sense at all,” Tsuna complained. “Now’s not the time to be playing games!”

“This is not a game,” she growled.

“Gokudera-kun is in trouble,” Tsuna yelled. “I need to go warn him! Now set me free!”

Haru blinked, then rushed forward to untangle Tsuna from the net. Lambo helped by making it worse, but his heart was probably in the right place. Tsuna was quickly enough on his feet again and racing away.

At the school Tsuna freaked out over learning that Hayato had left the school early. He raced back out and found a public phone, then slammed it back into its cradle thirty seconds later. “Damn it! Why is Gokudera-kun’s cell phone unreachable at a time like this!”

Two high school girls walking by jerked in surprise when they saw Tsuna and adjusted course. “It’s a Nami Middle student,” the darker-haired one said. “Don’t look, don’t look. We’d best not get too close.”

“We don’t want to get caught in anything strange, right,” her companion replied.

“Is that what people are saying now?” Tsuna whispered.

“Did you see what was happening in the shopping district earlier?”

“A fight broke out between a Nami Middle student and a Kokuyo student, right?”

Tsuna took off again. They were almost there when he could hear explosions, which was a likely indicator that Hayato had been targeted, but was still on his feet and active. Tsuna edged around the corner of a building. “Gokudera-kun!”

Hayato was sitting there having a smoke, but nearly lost his hold on the cigarette. “Jūdaime! Why are you here!?”

“I—I heard a rumor that said … you were being targeted by the Kokuyo Middle guys…”

“Wha—? You came especially because of that!?” Hayato jumped up. “Sorry for the trouble! I just took care of the guy!”

“It was true!?”

“He’s down somewhere over there,” Hayato said, turning to look. “Eh? He’s not there?”

“You saved me a lot of time.” Out of the smoke came a figure. The boy was bleeding fairly badly and his Kokuyo uniform was singed and shredded in places.

“Hiieee!”

Hisui face-palmed and threw out his gravitational net, to keep an eye on anyone approaching the street.

“Please be careful,” Hayato warned. “His weapons are yo-yos.”

“Even if you say that, I’m too scared to move,” Tsuna admitted in a whisper.
Kokuyo flicked his hands out, but Hayato moved faster, and shielded Tsuna with his body.
“Jūdaime, please escape,” he choked out before collapsing.

He sighed as Tsuna went into another meltdown over all the blood his friend was leaking. ‘Maybe aversion therapy would work?’ he mused, noting that someone was approaching at high speed. ‘It’s tempting to just shoot the kid, but I suspect… Well, if I’m wrong, I can cause the attack to fail, give the kitten a second chance to do something.’

“He’s broken,” Kokuyo said. “Now come with me.”

Tsuna stood there like a deer in the headlights.

“Let’s finish this quickly,” Kokuyo said, holding up his hands to reveal his weapons. As he went to attack the incoming presence rounded the corner and revealed itself to be Takeshi. Hisui relaxed slightly and watched as the baseball player did a perfect slide as the Kokuyo student lashed out with his yo-yos, and hauled Tsuna out of the way.

“This is called sliding into base!” Takeshi cried. “Safe!”

“Yamamoto-san,” Tsuna murmured with relief.

Kokuyo just stood there while the two talked, as Takeshi explained how he had come to be there, then said, “You’re in my way.” He lashed out again.

Takeshi pulled the baseball bat from his back and swung it. It was the same bat Renato had given the boy some time ago, so the speed at which Takeshi moved it morphed it into sword form, and the strings of the yo-yos were cut, rendering the pair useless.

“I see…” Kokuyo said. “Namimori Middle 2-A, seat number fifteen. You’re Yamamoto Takeshi.”

“So what if I am?” Takeshi said, eyes narrowed.

“You’re Ken’s prey,” Kokuyo said as voices sounded nearby, telling of the police on their way. “It’ll be trouble if I intervened…” He turned and started to walk away, saying, “I need a shower.”

“Is Gokudera-kun going to be all right?” Tsuna asked.

“Hey, hang in there!” Takeshi said.

Hisui stepped out of concealment and lifted Hayato up. “We’re going to the school. There’s too many people already at the hospital.”

“You’re really strong,” Takeshi commented admiringly.

He sighed and handed Hayato to the baseball player. “Let’s go,” he said, then pulled his phone out. As the boys started off he dialed Shamal and started to follow. “Yo, Shamal,” he said once the call connected. “I need a favor.”

“I’m kind of busy…”

“If you ever intend to enjoy my cooking again, you’ll get un-busy.”

“Uh, yeah. What do you need?”

“Get an infirmary bed ready for Hayato-kun at Nami Middle. I’ll explain once we get there.”
“Right, on it.”

The line went dead so he thumbed the side switch and pocketed the phone, then tapped his earpiece. “Heading to Nami Middle infirmary.”

It took a minute, but Renato eventually responded. “I’ll meet you there. I think I have everything I need. Had a conversation with Nono, too, but I’ll explain when I get there.”

“All right.”

Shamal had a bed ready and waiting when they pushed through the infirmary doors. He and Shamal shooed the boys out while they extracted the needles from Hayato, got him cleaned up, changed into a spare uniform, and into a bed. “So what the hell is going on?” Shamal asked. “Is this about those escapees Renato mentioned?”

“Yes. Hayato-kun was ranked third best fighter for Nami Middle, which is why he was attacked. They started at the twenty-fourth. They’re after Tsuna-kun. No real idea why, though.”

“If he’s third, who’s above him?” Shamal asked, checking Hayato’s pupils.

“Takeshi-kun and Hibari-kun. Hayato-kun lost a fair amount of blood, but he shouldn’t be unconscious like this. Poison on those needles, you think?”

“Very possibly. There is one thing I can do, but there’ll be side effects for a while.”

He looked at Hayato and frowned. Bezoars were not something he normally ever carried. There were not a lot of people who used poison as their weapon. Perhaps he should purchase some on his next trip, just in case. Even then, he wasn’t sure if they would work on mundanes or flame-active people. ‘It’s not like I intend to deliberately poison someone to test it,’ he thought.

“Side effects?”

“Episodes of fever, weakness, things like that,” Shamal replied. “The infection would take care of the poison, but there’s always a price to pay.”

“How long would it run for?”

“Eh, a day, maybe two.”

“Ren-kun should be here shortly. Technically he’s the boy’s guardian, under an alias.”

Shamal nodded. “How’d this happen? I know he was attacked, but…”

“He got these defending Tsuna-kun. The kitten froze up in fear, so Hayato-kun shielded him.”

Shamal sighed and shook his head. “I would have preferred that Hayato pushed Tsuna out of the way rather than allow himself to be hit. Silly boy is always ending up hurt.”

“He’s a bright kid, but I’m not sure Hayato-kun will come to the right conclusions on his own about why you stopped mentoring him,” he pointed out. “Maybe I can figure out some way to lead him there. Or Ren-kun.”

“Or me what?” Renato asked from behind him.

“One of us being devious enough to lead Hayato-kun to the realization that if he doesn’t protect himself, too, he’ll end up too hurt to continue protecting anyone else. That his life has value, too.”
“I’ll give it some thought. So what’s the deal here?”

“He’s been poisoned,” Shamal said. “I can infect him with something that’ll neutralize the poison, but it will have side effects for the next day, maybe two. Nothing too horrible, but certainly occasionally inconvenient.”

“And you’re technically his guardian.”

Renato pursed his lips. “Well, while we’re still mostly alone… Talked to Nono. He’s officially given this as a mission to Tsuna and his guardians. Expect another meltdown. That being the case, I think you should go ahead with the ‘cure’.”

Shamal nodded and got out his case.

Renato turned to him and said, “Dino doesn’t seem to think that all eight of the escapees are here. Only three were reported as heading to Japan, but I have my doubts. I’d rather expect all of them.”

“So would I. But, do we give the kids a proper report, or let them learn about things as they come. This isn’t a job in the usual sense and if we tell the kitten too much he’ll keel over.”

“Only the initial three who came to Japan,” Renato said. “But considering how well at least one of them fights…”

“The one who attacked Hayato-kun said that Takeshi-kun was ‘Ken’s prey’, so they’ve been taking turns, I suppose, which means those two are good, and Rokudo-san is probably better. Your point being, we take along whoever we can get, because you and I aren’t part of the offensive team.”

Hayato shifted and let out a soft, pained moan.

“He’ll be reasonably fine soon enough,” Shamal commented, “but I’d prefer you don’t set out on this jaunt until morning, to give him a good head start on healing.”

Renato nodded. “Shamal… Because we can’t be certain how many of them came, will you keep an eye out on the town while we’re away tomorrow?”

“Sure, sure.”

“If something—”

The door slammed open and Bianchi burst in holding a basket of questionable baked goods. “Why is Hayato here instead of the hospital?” she demanded.

“Bianchi~chan!” Shamal sang, and lunged.

She shifted her weight and nailed Shamal in the face with her foot. “Back off!”

Shamal cradled his face and smiled, undeterred. “Aw, come on. The hospital is packed right now and it’s Hisui who made the decision to bring Hayato here. I don’t treat guys, but getting a bed ready … it’s okay, isn’t it? Come stay with the good doctor,” he purred at her.

Her response was to punch him. “So not okay! I will attend to Hayato’s recuperation! If you’re going to get in my way, step outside!”

“But Bianchi-san,” Takeshi said quietly from the open doorway. Tsuna echoed him.

“If you say so,” Shamal said, back to cradling his face. “He’ll recover from one thing and die from
“Yeah,” Tsuna murmured.

Takeshi chortled. Perhaps he thought it was some kind of dry wit and wanted to be sociable?

“Yamamoto Takeshi, just what is so funny?” Bianchi asked, staring daggers at the boy. “Depending on your answer, I may kill you.”

Tsuna approached the bed and gazed sadly at Hayato, then left the room again. In that illusion of privacy he remonstrated himself. “I’m an idiot! Why couldn’t I move?! It’d have been fine if I’d just moved!”

Hisui moved to the doorway as Renato went out into the hall. Tsuna looked up and gawked at the state Leon was in on Renato’s hat, then pointed. “What the heck is that!”?

“Leon settled down into a cocoon state.”

“What the heck is that!?” Tsuna cried, then paused. “So these guys are mafia?”

“The opposite,” Renato replied. “These people have been exiled from the mafia for their crimes.”

Tsuna crouched down against the wall and clutched at his head. “Things have gotten very, very bad… What should I do?”

“These people are after you, kitten,” he said. “What should you do? You have no choice but to take down Rokudo-san and his gang.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There’s no way we can beat guys like these, right!?”

“Still with the yelling,” he muttered. ‘Must not smack the kitten. Or kick him. Or give him a senbon to a tender spot.’

Renato shrugged carelessly and produced an envelope from his pocket. “Even if you can’t do it, you have no choice.” He opened the envelope and slid a letter out, pocketing the envelope. He flipped the paper open and rattled it. “This is the first time the Vongola Nono has written a letter to you.”

Hisui noticed it was the printout of an email with the originating address blacked out.

“‘Dear Vongola Decimo Capo,’ ” Renato read. “‘I have heard of developments at your location from your tutors. As the highest ranking member of the Vongola Famiglia present, I am giving you this order. The time has come for you to take the next step. By midnight of ninth September, you are to capture or kill Rokudo Mukuro and his gang of escaped convicts. You are also to rescue the hostage at the same time. Best of luck, Nono Capo.’ ”
Tsuna freaked.

“‘P.S. If you refuse your mission you will be branded a traitor and put to death.’”

Meltdown commenced. Tsuna’s hands went up to cover his ears as he chanted, “I didn’t hear that! I didn’t hear anything! This has nothing to do with me!” He dropped his hands and fled down the hallway.

He sighed and followed, making sure the boy got home safely, planting a tracker on him as well. He could not prevent a single person from leaving the relative safety of the house—not without going in to manually manipulate the wards—so a tracker would have to do. If Tsuna left the assigned space on his mental map, he would know.

Once he was at home he cast a locating charm for the Kokuyo student from earlier. The general direction was that of Kokuyo itself. He got out a map of the surrounding territory and started plotting. Renato joined him once he got home, but quickly diverted to his laptop, where he started checking satellite feeds for the area. There were decided advantages to being highly trusted associates of the Vongola, and that included back door access to a number of things. Renato’s hacking skills were nearing legendary, but every little bit helped.

“All right. I have a very good idea where we need to go,” Renato said as Hisui set the map aside. “There’s been activity in an abandoned amusement park called Kokuyo Land over the past week or so, whereas before there was nothing. I’m willing to bet they’re there. Plus the heading you worked out. It fits.”

He nodded and got up to prepare dinner. “I have a tracker on the kitten in case he decides to do something stupid and leave the house,” he informed his lover, then got to work. “So we have, what? Tsuna-kun, Hayato-kun, Takeshi-kun, and probably Bianchi-chan. I can’t see her staying behind, and she’s not restricted the way we are. Hibari-kun is probably already there, and Fūta-kun has been captured. Assuming they don’t just dogpile us, we might be all right.”

Renato hummed. “I don’t think it’d be against the rules too much for you to impart a little gravity to the situation, just to ease things if it comes to it. A medical team has been arranged for. I just have to tell them where to cool their heels.”

“I’ll check after dinner, just to be certain.” And he did, disillusioning himself and speeding off on the heading from a location charm. Once he found Kokuyo Land he sent another locator and smiled to himself when it returned back a strong hit; that “student” was within, and that was good enough for him. He sped off again until he was a fair distance away, then apparated home. “They seem to be there,” he said. “I considered extending a net, but for all I know one of them could sense the flames.”

Renato nodded. “I’ll let the team know where to set up, then. Since the new highway went in there isn’t a lot of traffic past there, so they’ll have to be careful. Should be all right, though. They can go in tonight, use night vision to navigate rather than lights, get situated and camouflaged.”

The next morning they headed to the Sawada home. Tsuna was still freaking out, which meant he recognized that he was not getting out of things. “There’s no place left to feel secure,” Renato observed as they watched Tsuna pace around his room.

Tsuna jumped and spun around, finally noticing that they were perched in the tree outside his window.

“Not to mention,” Renato continued, taking a moment to jump inside, “the guy that attacked Gokudera knows you’re the boss. They’ll come after you directly next.”
Tsuna dropped onto his bed and clutched at his hair as Hisui jumped inside. “Hiiiiie. What should I do? I’m scared.”

“You already know what you should do,” he said. “I thought Nono made it pretty clear.”

“And don’t forget what those guys have already done in order to get to you,” Renato added. “If you keep running from this, the number of victims will only increase. Do you want them to come here next? Go after Mama?”

Tsuna got a flinty look to his eyes for a second. “Even so… Even so, I think what those guys are doing is really strange. Why get everyone into trouble…? That Rokudo guy really pisses me off!” He looked down uncertainly. “But, even Hibari-san hasn’t come back… There’s no way Dame-Tsuna can go up against a guy like that… It’s impossible…”

“That’s not what the others think,” he said, nodding toward the bedroom door.

“Let me go with you!” Hayato said. “This time, I’m gonna kill that spectacles freak!”

“Gokudera-kun!” Tsuna shot to his feet. “But what about your injuries?”

“What, those little scratches?” Hayato said, a smirk on his lips.

“I’m going, too!” Takeshi slipped into the room with a smile, the container for his bat slung across his back. “They told me all about the matter with Kokuyo Middle. It’s an inter-school mafia role-play, isn’t it?”

Bianchi slid in between the two boys. “I’ll be there. I’m worried about Hayato.”

Hayato unfortunately looked sideways and immediately hunched over. Hisui sighed as Renato offered Bianchi a set of tinted goggles to wear, and wondered if there was some bizarre enchantment he could work that would more or less permanently obscure part of Bianchi’s face to Hayato’s eyes, so they did not have to go through this every damn time.

“Right,” Renato said. “We’ll all go to the enemy grounds together. If there’s anything you want to take along that you didn’t already bring, go get it now. We’ll leave in an hour.”

Takeshi took off, saying he’d be back shortly, and Bianchi headed downstairs, even as Tsuna started protesting. Once the boy realized he could protest until he was blue in the face and get nowhere, he got changed and they headed downstairs.

Nana was just putting food on the table when they walked in, so they took seats. “What’s this?” she asked. “You changed into your favorite clothes. Are you going out to play?”

“Ano…”

“Maybe not today, hm? Nami Middle students are still getting attacked, right?”

Nana was distracted by Lambo and I-Pin scrambling into the room.

“Everyone’s going about peacefully in ignorance,” Tsuna muttered, watching as his mother indulged the two children, then went off with them.

“It is for that purpose that we’re going to take those people down,” Renato murmured, his hat still adulterated by a cocoon-state Leon.

“You make it sound so easy,” Tsuna complained, then looked over and gawked again. “Is Leon
“You really should be worrying about yourself, and not Leon,” Renato replied. “Every time Leon gets into this state, it means my student is going to face something life-threatening.”

“Don’t—wait, even Dino-san? And why would you say something like that before we leave?”

“Yes, even Dino,” Renato said, finishing up his meal. “And just as a reminder, we can’t fight your battles for you, so you’re going to have to try your hardest.”

“What!? For real!? But they’re escaped convicts,” Tsuna hissed.

“What part of the mission being given directly to you did you miss?” he said.

“The rules say the most we can do while we’re there is shoot you with a Dying Will Bullet,” Renato said.

“That’s the worst rule ever!”

Renato shrugged and got up, bussing his and Hisui’s dishes to the sink. “Oh, yeah, there’s only one left,” he lied.

They had plenty of them stocked, but Tsuna didn’t need to know that. Leon usually had one incubating at any given time, unless they purposefully prevented him from nabbing any. He had ingested one not long before he swallowed the gloves intended for Tsuna, and had yet to cough it back up. It was true, however, that a bullet left too long unused reverted to normal, so they made it a practice to check them every so often to weed out the no longer viable ones.

“Eh?”

“Dying Will Bullets are formed inside Leon’s body,” Renato explained. “But, he can’t make any when he’s like this. Besides, it takes several days for each bullet, in a process similar to an oyster creating pearls.”

“I—I had no idea Leon was such an important pet,” Tsuna said quietly.

“The point being,” he said, “don’t count on more than one of them.”

“I should be glad I won’t be shot more than once with one, but… This is bad either way! What do I —”

Takeshi rushed in, bag in one hand, large thermos in the other. “It’s finally time to go!” he said cheerfully. “I brought sushi and tea.”

“Are you looking for a fight, Yamamoto Takeshi?” Bianchi said from the doorway. “Is what I prepared too stingy for you?” She held open a box filled with, no doubt, Poison Cooking.

“We can bring both, right?” Takeshi said reasonably. “There’s a lot of us!”

“So it’s just Gokudera-kun now,” Tsuna said. “It’s unusual for him to be—oh. Is he still upstairs?”

He rushed off.

“Bianchi-chan,” he said. “Please put on the goggles.”

“What? Oh.” She replaced the cover for the box she was holding and slipped them on.
Once Tsuna and Hayato appeared Renato said, “All right. Let’s be off.”

Kokuyo Land was a mess. Behind the closed and locked gates it rose upward along the hills, a wasteland of broken buildings and encroaching flora, a place left to degenerate under the effects of weather and time.

“This is really ominous,” Tsuna said quietly.

“Is the whole area just ruins?” Hayato asked.

“Long ago it was an entertainment resort called Kokuyo Land,” Renato said.

Tsuna hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve been here before, years ago! That’s right. There was a karaoke club, a cinema, and even a small garden zoo here.”

“There was a plan for renovation,” he said, “but two years ago a typhoon came through and caused a mudslide. Since then, it’s been in this condition.”

Hayato walked to the gate and examined it. “The lock’s all rusted. It doesn’t look like those guys used this entrance. What should we do?”

‘Seriously? I can think of half a dozen ways in off the top of my head.’

“We’ve already decided, right?” Bianchi said, lifting her hand. “We go straight through the front door.”

“W-wait, Bianchi-san!”

“Poison Cooking: Sakura Cake!” she cried, and pasted the lock with her creation. It melted, and Hayato gingerly pulled the chains free so he could push the gate open.

“All right,” Renato said briskly. “Since we have no idea where they are, let’s do a thorough search of the buildings all the way to the summit.”

Takeshi laughed. “This is really cool! This mafia role-play is super real!”

“I’m telling you, Yamamoto-san—”

“Tsuna,” Renato interrupted sharply, “since you’ve been here before, you should lead the way.”

Tsuna stuttered a lot of nothing for a few seconds, then protested, “The last time I came here was a really long time ago!” At Renato’s stern look he gazed around with a frown of effort. “Eh… From what I remember, right after we entered the gate there was a glass building housing the garden zoo.”

Takeshi started walking forward slowly, head sweeping back and forth. “There doesn’t seem to be any such thing here. But… Hm.” He crouched down and touched the ground. “This looks like some animal’s tracks. It’s fresh, too. A dog, perhaps? But no, it’s way too big for that.”

Bianchi crouched down as well. “The part where the claw is… has blood.”

“Hiiiiie,” Tsuna quietly squeaked. “Could the animals from the zoo still be around?”

“No way,” Hayato said.

Bianchi got up and started looking around, then went over to a nearby tree and ran a hand along the surface. “The tree trunk here has been badly gouged.”
“Reminds me of fangs,” he said.

“And those cages over there,” Hayato said. “Remains of the zoo? The bars are broken…”

He sighed as Tsuna went into another meltdown and idly wondered if Leon could eat that sort of reaction—when he wasn’t incubating oddities, anyway. Even if he could, would there be a point in forcing the kitten not to flip out, rather than finding a way to train it out of him? It made him want to send an email to Nono asking if the man had been like that in his youth, or if Iemitsu had been.

“Behind us!” Hayato yelled. “It’s coming!”

Takeshi turned in time to catch a wolf a mere inch from his face. His mean grip crushed the creature’s lower jaw. “This thing…! It’s already dead!?”

Two more came running in, but Bianchi and Hayato downed them while Tsuna clutched at his hair and was generally useless.

“I’ve got you now,” was snarled, and then a blond male with clawed hands and feet leaped into view, right at Takeshi. Takeshi went flying, landing on his back, and a split second later vanished from view. The blond jumped and disappeared, as well.

The group rushed over to the spot to see a hole in the ground. “Yamamoto-san!” Tsuna called down.

“The mudslide must have buried the garden zoo,” Renato observed, staring down inside.

“We’re standing on the roof!?” Tsuna said. “Yamamoto-san, are you all right?”

“He’s … laughing?” Hayato murmured, then shouted, “You idiot! You’re holding us up!”

“To your right!” Tsuna shouted. “Yamamoto-san, be careful down there! There’s a beast or something in the shadows!”

“Welcome, Yamamoto Takeshi,” said a voice from the shadows. They could only hear it because of the echoing effect of the buried building’s shape. “Kaki-pi’s asleep, you know. I’ve got no orders and nothing to do, so I’m really bored. Then, here comes my prey, all by himself. That makes me—”

The blond stepped out of the shadows. “—super happy.”

“So this is the Ken the other one referred to,” he thought.

“Oh?” Takeshi said.

“Eh? It’s a person—he’s human!” Tsuna said. “In Kokuyo’s uniform, too!”

He exchanged a long-suffering look with Renato.

“Are those guys above your friends? Just wait patiently there,” said Ken. “Because you’ll be next to die.”

Takeshi started laughing. “Hey, you. You’re quite skillful despite your appearance, aren’t you? Those zombie dog puppets earlier were damn real!”

“That idiot,” Hayato muttered.

“…Is this guy for real?” Ken said. “Well, doesn’t matter. All righty, then.” Ken launched himself forward and used the wall like a springboard, nearly hitting Takeshi on the rebound. That he missed may have been on purpose. He did it again, but as he jumped, one hand came up to his mouth
briefly. On the rebound he spun and flipped mid-air, and rebounded off another part of the wall, to head back down, straight at Takeshi. “Feeding time!”

Takeshi’s hand went straight to the container at his back, to bring forward his baseball bat at a speed fast enough to morph it into a sword. The blond landed on Takeshi, who barely managed to keep standing, and shattered the blade with his teeth before springing back to land on the ground in a crouch.

“The next thing I gouge out will be your neck, yo.”

He exchanged another look with Renato.

“I see,” Takeshi said, staring at his broken weapon. “This mafia role-playing game is adjusted accordingly until the opponent is beaten, eh? So, that’s the rule, then?”

“Doesn’t he get scared of anything…?” Tsuna asked quietly.

“He’s not the sort who likes to lose,” Renato replied. “But he’s not as calm as he looks after seeing his bat get broken.”

“Before we continue, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“You weren’t suddenly replaced or anything, right? When did you put on your disguise?” Takeshi asked.

“Huh,” Ken said almost disbelievingly. “He is for real… Doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll tell you. You know how you can change game cartridges to play different games?” He reached into his pocket and produced several sets of upper teeth. “This is the same thing. When I change the cartridge…” He removed a set from his mouth. “I can adopt the abilities of various animals.” Another set was clicked into place, and a transformation took place. “Kong channel!”

“No way!? That’s impossible!” Tsuna cried.

“Whoa, that’s cool,” Takeshi said. “Is that the newest type of doping?”

“That’s not it!” Ken snarled, then launched himself forward to slam his gorilla-like arms into Takeshi, sending the boy across the room to slam into the wall. “Come on, come on. Don’t be taking a break now. No matter where you run, I’ll find you in an instant. The scent of those dogs’ blood is all over you. When I’m in my wolf channel … I can sniff you out right away!”

“Damn it,” Hayato cursed, getting some of his dynamite ready. “I can’t see.”

“Don’t,” Hisui said sharply. “You send that down there and you’re likely to collapse the building, and bury Takeshi-kun.”

“He’s at an overwhelming disadvantage with his sword broken,” Bianchi commented. “He has no reach and he can’t get close to the enemy. There’s no way to strike a winning blow.”

“Look,” Renato said, his eyes cutting toward Tsuna slightly. “He’s shielding his body. It’s as if he wants to defeat his opponent without causing injury to himself.”

“You keep running away. Are you purposely drawing out this fight?”

“Oh, no,” Takeshi replied. “It’s nothing like that at all. I have other important things to do this
autumn, besides the whole mafia role-playing game, you know.”

“I don’t get you, fool,” Ken snarled, making another swipe at Takeshi.

“This is bad,” Tsuna moaned. “I shouldn’t have brought him to a place like this!”

Renato rolled his eyes slightly. “If you’re so worried, why don’t you give him a hand?” he asked, then kicked Tsuna in.

“What the hell did you do that for!?” Hayato demanded.

“Shut up and watch.”

Takeshi’s focus jerked around to the disturbance. “Tsuna-kun!”

“Eh? Who’s that? Some small fry friend of yours? Okay, then. While you run, Yamamoto, I’ll hunt this rabbit down first.” Ken launched himself again. “Feeeeding time!” He changed direction mid-air and hit the ground when Takeshi nailed him with a rock. “What!?”

“You were fighting me, weren’t you?” Takeshi asked with a goofy smile. The fight went quickly at that point. Takeshi lured Ken in using his arm as bait to get the guy close enough for long enough to jab the hilt of his broken sword into the side of Ken’s head to knock him out.

“I’m sorry!” Tsuna said. “It’s all my fault. Your arm was… What about baseball!? What about the tournament!?”

“Oi, oi, give me a break,” Takeshi said with a laugh. “Didn’t I say this before? The person who would treat baseball as something more important than friends is no more, after that dive from the rooftop you did. Besides, this injury is nothing. I can still play baseball.”

Even from his vantage Hisui could see that there was a lot of blood. With the fight over they were free to lower ropes down, one to tie up Ken, and one looped at the end, to haul the two up. Hisui set about cleaning and wrapping the injury as Renato pulled a photograph from one of his pockets.

“The one Takeshi just defeated was Jōshima Ken. Look.” He held the photograph up in front of Tsuna.

“This… This is the group of three we’re facing?”

“The one in the middle is Rokudo Mukuro.”

As Hisui finished with Takeshi’s arm, Tsuna turned away from the image to mope. Takeshi went over to Renato holding the remains of his bat, so Hisui went to Tsuna and smacked the back of his head. “Stop thinking such stupid thoughts.”

“But I was too scared to move again,” Tsuna whispered.

“And at some point you won’t be,” he replied. “It just means we have to torture you more often, kitten.”

Renato hauled a brand new bat out of nowhere—his enchanted pouch, of course—and handed it to Takeshi, who accepted it happily and guided it into the “sheath” for it.

“Well, anyway,” Hayato said gleefully, “looks like the spectacles freak is still out, and we’ve beaten the animal freak. I didn’t expect bringing Rokudo down to be such a breeze.”
Laughter came up from below. “You silly bunch! You know nothing! I was faking so that I didn’t have to confess anything to you. I used my opossum channel! But, I’ve thought about it. No matter what I tell you guys, there won’t be a problem! Because there’s no way you can defeat Mukuro-san! All of you are going to die before even seeing his face!”

“What did you say!?” Hayato shouted down the hole. “Eat sand!”

Bianchi rolled her eyes and wandered off for a moment, then returned with a large rock. “You’re too soft, Hayato.” She dropped it through the opening. “I wonder if those twitching movements are him faking death, too.”

Renato sighed and shook his head. “Let’s not underestimate Rokudo. The jailbreak happened on the eve of his execution. He and his fellows killed both prisoners and wardens in their escape. Don’t take what they say lightly. When they threaten to kill, they most likely mean it. So stop freaking out, or calling this some game. Take it seriously, or you’re guaranteed to die.”

“Let’s go.”

Some time later Tsuna was the first to speak. “We’ve been walking quite a while. Can—can we take a little break?”

“That’s true,” Takeshi said. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Let’s use this opportunity to eat, then,” Hayato said.

‘I suppose the fact that we aren’t currently under attack counts as an opportunity,’ he thought.

“How about over there?” Tsuna suggested, gesturing at a grouping of picnic tables.

“Then allow me to distribute the sushi and tea,” Takeshi said, setting things down on one of the tables.

Bianchi hip-checked him and said, “Get out of my way, Yamamoto.” She got her own offerings on the table and held up a clear plastic container. “Here, Tsuna, your cold soup of green-yellow wild bugs.”

“Bugs!?”

“It’s cold and refreshing—better than sushi.”

A second later the soup started bubbling and frothing over the top of the container. Bianchi let go and snatched her hand back with a wince. “Hot!”

“Hot, hot, hot! What’s this?” Tsuna said, clutching his head. “Some new type of Poison Cooking?”

“It wasn’t me!”

Takeshi hummed. “The bentos are…”

“Oh shit.”

“Duck!” Takeshi yelled, and every dove out of the way.

Hisui ignored all the panicking and cast out a net, trying to figure out where the attacker was. Just as he pinpointed the disturbance Hayato said, “This noise… There!” and threw handfuls of dynamite.
“What lame weapons,” came a female voice. When the smoke cleared they could see a girl sitting there. If her hair and eyes were anything to go by, she was a Sky, but Hisui sincerely doubted that. She had a clarinet cradled against her. “I wonder how a bunch of guys like you managed to get both Kaki-pi and Ken.”

“She’s wearing a Kokuyo uniform,” Tsuna said.

“But our enemy should have been a team of three,” Hayato said, confusion wrinkling his brow.

“If it weren’t for Mukuro-chan’s orders, I wouldn’t have dressed up like this!” she said. “But, you guys are pretty shabby-looking, even for mafiosi. All I see are men with no brains. How sad. Men are money, yo. In the end, only Mukuro-chan suits me the best.”

‘I wonder how Bianchi-chan feels about being called a man,’ he wondered, recognizing the girl as one of the escapees, M.M. to be specific.

“Well, it’s time to totally mess you up. I’m going to send you to the afterlife. Then you can look for proper bags and suits!” She raised the clarinet to her mouth and blew. The already destroyed food on the table frothed again and exploded. And again.

Bianchi finally stood up, tired of listening to the boys argue about how to respond. “I’m going in.”

To the girl she said, “Hey, you’re wrong. Money is not the most important thing. Love is.”

“Huh? What’s with this woman? How annoying.”

“That weapon is constructed like a microwave oven, isn’t it?” Bianchi said. “When a substance is exposed to radiation, it’s water molecules will start vibrating, causing its temperature to rise.”

M.M. shrugged. “So what if you know that? If humans were to bask in this sound wave, they would also boil with a boom!” She laughed delightedly.

“I’ve allowed you your impertinent talk. Time for action.” Bianchi raised both hands, palms up. “Poison Cooking: Large Scale Meals! All you can eat!” She dashed forward, toward the girl.

“Not a bad tactic,” Renato murmured.

“And it looks as though the girl doesn’t have a clue,” he replied, nodding.

“All right, bring it on, you annoying person! I’m going to microwave your brain matter up!” The clarinet went back into position, and she blew.

Despite the food on her platters frothing madly, Bianchi kept going, which visibly surprised the girl. Bianchi got close enough to hurl one of the platters, though M.M. dodged.

“Close quarters combat—” M.M. twisted her clarinet and revealed it to also be a set of nunchaku. “—is also a specialty!” She lashed out and hit the other platter, that Bianchi raised as a shield, and tossed her back with the impact. “What ‘love’! Nothing beats money! Come on, it’s time to play my finishing number. Let’s watch your brain matter boil!”

“It’s already over,” Hayato said, one hand on Takeshi’s shoulder to restrain him.

M.M. raised her reassembled clarinet and went to blow, then gagged. The instrument was covered in Poison Cooking, and now the girl was poisoned, too.

“Bianchi-san is really frightening,” Tsuna whispered, eyes wide.

Takeshi laughed, but Hisui was more interested in the person he could feel approaching.

“It’s actually good that you’ve defeated that greedy little girl,” said the newcomer, an old, bespectacled man wearing what looked like a bucket hat. He was carrying an open laptop. “Please take a look at this. Your friends are my next targets.”

“Kyoko-chan!” Tsuna cried. “Haru-chan!”

Hisui paid very careful attention to the screen, glanced at Renato, and slipped away as quickly as possible. The second he was out of sight he sent a text to Shamal, then apparated. As he raced toward his target he tapped his earpiece, just to keep in contact. Shamal got to Kyoko and her friend first, though he was hamming it up, apparently.

He found Haru a few seconds later and froze the assassin in place, then looked around to see what he had for witnesses. Haru was oblivious, earbuds in place and a book keeping her gaze. With no one else around he “reached” out and hauled the assassin back away from the girl, but still within presumed camera range, then sent senbon through his heart. He dragged the guy behind some bushes and made sure of the kill, then sped off at high speed, dragging the assassin away. Only after he was fairly certain it would not be witnessed did he use a singularity to clean up.

A quick apparation later and he was in time to witness Tsuna hauling off and punching the old man so hard he hit the ground with the breath knocked out of him. He sent another text to Shamal, letting him know the secondary target was taken care of, and a thank you.

“Damn you! This is unforgivable, you little brat!” The old man glanced at the laptop screen. “What are you doing!? Kill them!”

“Good afternoon, Dr Shamal,” Kyoko was saying.

“What’s the health room doc doing here?” her friend asked with a frown.

“I would strongly suggest that you ladies get yourselves home with all haste today. Otherwise, if you witness my fighting prowess, you’d be smitten into insomnia.”

Hisui rolled his eyes; so did Renato.

“Ew, the guy’s a pervert!” the friend said and grabbed Kyoko’s hand. “Let’s go!”

“Let me kiss you next time, ’kay? My lovely little kittens!” Shamal turned back and laughed softly. “Right, shall we, then? I am so done with you. You’ve caused too much trouble for the fair maidens.”

Tsuna sidled up to him and gave him a twisted smile of gratitude and horror.

“Ah, since I’m a doctor, I should point out that you seem to be suffering from vibration syndrome. It would be best if you refrained from moving around too much.”

Hisui’s sharp eyes spotted a mosquito flying around near Shamal.

“But, it’s too late for that.” Shamal turned away uncaringly. “You will now have a seizure.”

The assassin apparently vibrated his way into having the general consistency of jelly and collapsed a second later, dead.
“He is such a drama queen,” Renato muttered.

“Damn it!” the old man cursed. “Those two are serial killers called the Bloody Twins! And they died, just like that… Damn, but Rokudo-san’s missions are always so hard,” he said, and started running.

Hayato pursued, saying, “Where do you think you’re going?” and kicked the guy in the small of his back, knocking him to the ground. “Huh. It only took one kick?”

“The ones giving the orders are never much themselves, huh…” Takeshi obviously did not think that statement through considering who one of his friends was.

Tsuna turned his attention back to Hisui and displayed that twisted smile again, then frowned. “Wait a minute. What’s with this old man, those twins, and the girl? What’s going on? We didn’t hear anything about these assassins!”

“Those were the guys who broke out of prison with Rokudo,” Renato said.

“Hold on a sec! There were more than just Mukuro’s three-man gang?”

“I never said it was just three people. Actually, I didn’t specify how many, and you never bothered to ask. But the data we had only showed three of them coming to Japan. Obviously the others slipped in as well, and met up with Rokudo.” Renato produced more photographs and fanned them out in his hand. “According to the data, the escapees most tightly connected to the gang of three were M.M., Birds, and the Bloody Twins.”

Tsuna sighed. “There aren’t any more, right?”

“Yes, there are,” Bianchi said, staring off into the trees. “Quit hiding and show yourself. I know you’re there. If you don’t come out, we’re coming over.”

“W-wait,” said a familiar voice. “It’s me,” Fūta said, peeking out from behind a tree.

“Fūta-kun!?” Tsuna said. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you manage to escape?” Takeshi asked.

“Anyway… Thank goodness! You look well,” Tsuna said, smiling. “Everyone’s here, so it’s going to be all right. Come on, let’s go home together.” He started walking toward the boy.

“Don’t come here, Tsuna-nii. I… can’t go back to where everyone is. I—I’m following Mukuro-san now.”

“What—what are you saying?”

“Good-bye,” Fūta said, then turned and raced off into the trees.

“Fūta-kun! Hey, wait up!” Tsuna yelled, and raced off after him.

Hisui nailed the kitten with a tracker just in case, and refreshed the listening charm tied to his other earpiece.

“Jūdaime!” Hayato shouted. “It’s dangerous to go deeper!”

Of course, before anyone could do much more, their next opponent showed up, taking out a nearby exposed steel beam.
“What do you think?” he murmured to Renato. “One of us shadows him? Or we both stay here?”

“You know… A part of me says the kid’s an idiot for running off like that. But on the other hand, he is attempting to bring Fūta back. We’re down to two missing people from the group. Kakimoto and…”

“Eh, I’m listening in. I’ll go if it’s necessary.”

The latest assassin was using a massive iron ball to block off escape routes. A heavy-duty chain was attached to it and the man sent the thing out like it weighed nothing.

“The only way we can go after the boss is by beating this guy,” Hayato said to Takeshi.

“But what’s with that crazy strength?” Takeshi asked.

“If we’re hit directly by that iron ball, we’re finished,” Hayato said, then jerked and hunched over slightly. “Let’s finish this quick, you super strong bastard. I don’t have time to play with you.”

“It’s futile,” the man said, reaching up to take the bill of his cap in hand and flinging his hat away. “I’m going to win.”

“Still missing two people,” Renato muttered.

“And they could be anywhere, still.”

“He’s finally shown himself,” Takeshi said.

“What have you done to Fūta?” Bianchi demanded.

“Fūta…? No idea.”

Hayato chose that moment to collapse to his knees. Bianchi rushed to support him and drag him out of the line of fire.

“No idea?” he murmured. “Is this even Rokudo-san?”

“I’ll be your opponent, then,” Takeshi stated, and was quickly slammed in the torso by that huge sphere.

“No path exists for you to live,” the man said. “Abandon all hope.”

“Oi, oi, hold it.” Takeshi pushed himself up to a seated position and grinned goofily. “I haven’t lost it yet. If I hadn’t had this as a shield, I’d have been a goner,” he said, indicating the container for his bat.

Renato brought out his favorite gun and held it ready. “We still have the same problem,” he pointed out. “We need to figure out the trick behind that weapon.”

“It is foolish to resist,” the man intoned. “These useless struggles will only invite your tragic deaths.”

He attacked again.

Takeshi got up and ran forward, dragging his bat in the dirt to make the surface dust rise up, then remarked on how that dust reacted to the incoming sphere. He then tripped, narrowly missing being slammed again. “It picked up some wind. It’s like a moving baseball that creates a disturbance in the air current behind it, but this is on a whole other level.”
'Trust Takeshi to make baseball analogies.'

““The secret lies in the snakes carved on the surface of the ball,” Renato said after a moment. “The snake-shaped engravings cause the flow of air that strikes the sphere to bend into a spiral. An air current that passes through those depressions is entangled in complex knots, which amplifies its power many times, resulting in a violent gale.”

The man stared for a moment. “Even if you understand it, you still won’t be able to win against me.” He yanked back on the chain and attacked again. Takeshi, despite his better understanding of the situation, was slammed into a tree and knocked out.

Bianchi stepped up next as Hayato collapsed again.

“Kami-sama, I hate just standing here doing nothing,” he whispered.

“Hey you! What are you doing!?”

He looked over to see Tsuna up in the tree line. Even from that distance he could see that the kitten quickly regretted shouting out his presence.

“Come down here, Vongola,” the man said. “Or wait while I kill off this woman.” He yanked on the chain again.

“That pretty much says it,” Renato muttered, and fired. “Come on, kitten.”

“You know,” he said conversationally, as Tsuna streaked down and slammed into the sphere, “for all that Bianchi-chan can be a royal pain in the ass, she has plenty of guts and resolve. She’s one brave lady.”

Yeah.”

Tsuna slid backward, but he and the ball came to a stop just in front of Bianchi. He looked up. “I will take you down with my Dying Will, Rokudo Mukuro.”

“Apparently he gets feisty when you push him too far,” Renato said. “I guess seeing his friends laid out like this…”

“The boy is capable of that…?” Bianchi said wonderingly.

“So, hm, flame boxers this time. I wonder who chooses them,” he said, “Nana-chan or Tsuna-kun?”

“Looks like I’ll have to use my full power against you,” the man said, managing to stand back up after Tsuna slammed the sphere into his torso. “Let’s go all out.”

“He’s okay even after taking that blow?” Bianchi said disbelievingly. “What the hell is he?”

“Ball-play is a hobby to pass time!” The man flung the sphere upward, then dashed forward toward Tsuna. “My true forte would be meat bullet battles!” he cried, striking at Tsuna’s chest and getting through his guard. He grabbed Tsuna and dragged him up, then kneeed him in the face and tossed him into the air.

“I don’t think I’ve ever run across anyone that strong before,” Renato commented. “You will step in and un-crush the kid if necessary, right?”

“Yes.”
Tsuna was caught and slammed into the ground. “Now the finishing blow,” he said, then stepped away, just as the sphere dropped down on Tsuna. “All your hopes have collapsed. Who’s next?” A sound made him pivot.

Tsuna had pushed the sphere aside.

“What!? Impossible… Is this guy a monster?”

“You’re not that evil a person,” Tsuna said.

“There we go,” Renato whispered.

“You… What did you say!?”

“That weak will of yours … could never defeat my Dying Will.”

“…‘Will’ you say? Don’t talk as if you know anything about me! Killing you is my true will!” The man rushed forward, hand extended in a claw.

“That’s a lie!”

“Shut up, kid!”

“I’ll crush you with my Dying Will!” Tsuna got in the first hit, straight to the guy’s torso. The man collapsed and coughed up blood.

“How… How could I lose?”

“When you attacked you closed your eyes, and you didn’t let your iron ball complete the finishing blow. This was all because of the guilt in your heart … conflicting within you.”

“What…?”

“I thought it was strange the first time I saw you,” Tsuna said, the flame at his forehead sputtering out. “It almost felt just like this kid we have at home. I didn’t feel any fear toward you.”

“I see, so this is the next Vongola capo. I admit defeat. No wonder Rokudo Mukuro is cautious about you.”

“Eh!? What did you just say? But you’re the one in the picture! The prison photograph.”

“I’m a shadow warrior,” the man said. “The real Rokudo Mukuro has never had his photograph taken. Furthermore, Rokudo is the one who took everything away from me! Five years ago I was part of a mafia famiglia in Northern Italy. I was an orphan, so the capo and famiglia who brought me up were my life. In order to repay their kindness I served as a bodyguard until I became known as the strongest guy in the area. One day, the capo picked up another orphan. It seemed the capo really liked the kid and had great plans for him.

“The boy became my responsibility. I loved him like he was truly part of my family, just like the famiglia had treated me. Not long after that, the incident happened. I came home to the base one day after playing cards. Everyone had been killed.”

“That was a famous incident,” Renato said.

“I was enraged at the perpetrator, but who was to know that the investigation which followed would lead me to such an identity? It was me! I killed them!”
“How … could that be?” Tsuna asked.

“Since then, how many times have I woken up, remembering nothing, while corpses lay at my feet.”

“But you didn’t intend to kill anyone, right?” Tsuna asked.

“Of course. I thought that I was going completely insane … and decided to commit suicide. But it was impossible. I was totally controlled by him. Yes, it was that kid, Rokudo Mukuro. He had me under his control! I don’t know when or how, but I lost my name and will, and became the fake Rokudo Mukuro. It was hopeless. I did everything and anything for him—I became a killing machine.”

“What sort of guy is this Rokudo? This is not something a human would do…”

“Let’s kick his ass, Jūdai!”

“Gokudera-kun! You’re all right!?”

“Vongola, you may be the only one who can do it,” the man said. “Listen to me, Vongola. Mukuro’s real objective is—” He stopped, eyes moving rapidly, then slammed a fist into Tsuna to knock him back and stood in front of him. His arm and part of his chest was peppered with dozens of those needles.

“It’s the yo-yo freak!” Hayato said, looking back toward the origin.

“He’s gone,” Hisui said. “Their objective was to silence him, obviously.”

“How could they!!?” Tsuna cried. “Please hang on!!!”

“What a terrible life I’ve had…”

“No… Tell me your real name,” Tsuna pleaded. “You have a real name, right?”

“It’s… I am … Lancia…”

“Please hang on, Lancia-san!”

“Having my name called like that… I remember now, long ago, my family… Now I can rejoin them … right…” Lancia’s eyes slipped closed and he went still, only the bare movement of his chest giving any sign that he still lived.

“He was being used,” Hayato said, “and the moment he outlived his usefulness… Shit.”

“That guy really pisses me off,” Tsuna said, standing up, hands clenched into fists at his sides. “Let’s go. Let’s find Mukuro.”

“We used the last bullet,” Renato pointed out, head tilted to one side.

“I know that, but… But… We have to do something about Rokudo Mukuro!”

“…I see. Lancia isn’t dead yet, you know. If we get an antidote to him within an hour to counteract the poison on those needles…”

“That yo-yo guy must have the antidote,” Bianchi said.

Hisui went over to check on Takeshi and move him to a more comfortable and sheltered spot. As he
did so he noticed Renato fiddling with his phone, probably sending information to the medical team on standby. Once he was finished he fetched out a spare set of clothes for Tsuna and handed them over.

The boys were discussing how to proceed when a canary flew in and landed near Birds’s fallen form, looking for seeds. “Birds was done in!” it chirped. “Birds was done in!”

“Quiet,” Renato said calmly. “Let’s just watch for the moment. It may be trained to call for its comrades when its master is down.”

“Birds was done in!” the canary chirped again, then launched itself and flew off toward a building in the distance, the exterior of which was made up of many glass panes. Some were broken, but a surprising number were intact.

“In other words,” Hayato said.

“That’s where Rokudo Mukuro is,” Tsuna finished.
“It’s a no-go here, as well,” Bianchi stated with a sigh.

The interior of the glass-fronted building was heavily damaged from the typhoon, but more damage appeared to have been caused deliberately.

“The stairs have been destroyed.”

‘Kami-sama, thanks for pointing out what we can all already see.’

“Rokudo is probably on an upper floor,” Renato said. “There should be at least one set of traversable stairs left somewhere. Or a ladder.”

“I don’t understand,” Tsuna said.

Renato sighed. “It’s easier to defend a base if possible routes of attack are narrowed down, right? On the other hand, he’s cut off possible escape routes—or at least made them more difficult to use. He must be very confident of winning.”

They eventually ran across an unbroken ladder bolted to a wall, of a sort maintenance people often used, or for emergencies. Kakimoto chose that moment to appear.

“It’s him!” Tsuna cried.

“The yo-yo guy,” Hayato said, then produced a handful of dynamite. He threw it, but not quite as far as the target. When they exploded it created a smoke screen effect.

“Jūdaiime, leave things here to me. Please go on ahead.”

“Gokudera-kun…”

“Hayato, listen to me!” Bianchi said, moving closer. “When you were struck before, it was Shamal’s Trident mosquito that saved your life. The virus he gave you needs time to complete its job. Until then, there will be side effects.”

‘At least Shamal let her know, too.’

“You will suffer those painful attacks again. Knowing this, are you still going to do this?”


Bianchi just stared at him for a moment, then turned to Tsuna. “Let’s go.”

“Eh, but…”

“Please go ahead, Jūdaiime. Get Mukuro!”

“Yes, I know, but still…” Tsuna took a deep breath. “I understand, I’m going!”

The moment they were up the ladder he paused and shot a look at Renato.

“He has to prove himself,” Renato murmured. “To himself, if no one else. His pride took a beating,
more than his body.”

He sighed and found another earpiece, then tied a listening charm to it from Hayato, plus tossed out a tracker.

“The third floor should have the cinema,” Tsuna said, looking around. “Let’s try there?”

The “stage” held a loveseat. Cushions were piled up on it and a teenager with blueish hair sat at the center. The flooring was a mess, and the curtains for the stage were tattered rags, revealing a stained and holey screen at the back. The cinema must have doubled as an acting theatre.

“I’m very happy that we could meet again,” the teen said.

“It’s you!” Tsuna said. He dashed forward a few steps, to the edge of the highest tier of seating. “Is this where you’re being held?” He looked back and said, “I met this person in the forest earlier. He’s a Kokuyo student and a hostage.”

He edged closer to Renato and whispered, “I think this is the real deal. He asked way too many questions, probing questions.”

“Please come forward slowly,” the teen said. “I would like to take some time to get to know you better … Vongola Jūdai.”

“Eh? How did you know I’m Vongola…?”

“You’re mistaken, Tsuna!” Bianchi warned. “That’s—”

“That’s right,” the teen interrupted. “I’m the real Rokudo Mukuro.”

A noise snapped Tsuna out of his panic. Fūta had stepped out of a side room. “Fūta-kun! You startled me.”

“Looks like you’re all right,” Bianchi said, eyeing the boy as he moved slowly closer.

“I searched for you after we met earlier.”

“It’s dangerous here,” Bianchi said. “You better step back.”

And then Fūta brought up a wicked three-pronged blade. In a flash he had stabbed it into Bianchi’s stomach.

Tsuna finally reacted. “Bianchi-san! Hold on! Fūta-kun, what are you doing!?”

Fūta took a swipe at Tsuna, but missed.

“His mind is being controlled,” Renato called out to the kitten as a hint.

Renato reached back and pulled a whip from one of his concealed pouches, and used it to capture Tsuna and haul him back toward them. “I borrowed this whip from Dino earlier. Use it.”

Tsuna got up and turned on him with a look of disbelief as the weapon was shoved into his hands. “What do you expect me to do with it!?”

“Do whatever you want,” Renato replied. “If you don’t fight, you’ll die.”

Tsuna stared back at Fūta, unwilling to hurt the boy, then dashed off toward Mukuro.
Hisui sighed audibly when Tsuna brandished his whip against Mukuro and managed a re-enactment of Dino’s fight with the bear. He went down hard. On the plus side, he tangled Fūta up, as well.

“Kufufufu. You surprise me, as always,” Mukuro said, cheerful smile on his face. “Oh, look, you better watch your back. It’s dangerous, yo.”

“Hayato-kun had another attack,” he whispered. “Sounds like he just tumbled down some stairs. Oddly enough, one of those canaries is there, singing the Nami Middle school song.”

Tsuna quickly turned and saw Fūta struggling to reach the blade he’d dropped. A quick swipe moved it out of reach. “Stop it, Fūta-kun!” Tsuna got a thoughtful look on his face, missing Fūta struggling forward again and getting his hand on the blade’s hilt, but jerked back when Fūta’s hand came up. “It’s not your fault,” Tsuna said quietly. “None of it is your fault. We’re all on your side. You don’t have to worry about a thing. Come home with us.”

“Hibari, you think?” Renato whispered back.

Mukuro’s cheerful smile slipped briefly as Fūta hesitated, said Tsuna’s name, and then collapsed, bleeding from the nose and ears.

“I can’t think of anyone else who would teach a bird that song so quickly,” he replied.

“Now, see, you’ve gone too far,” Mukuro said. “Looks like he’s suffering from a clash of wills. I believe he hasn’t slept at all in these past ten days. Come to think of it, he was the first to fall into our hands.”

“He was missing for ten days and nobody at that house noticed?” he whispered. “What the fuck? Perhaps I need to have a chat with Nana-chan.”

Renato nodded at him.

“We came to Japan in order to find the whereabouts of the Vongola Decimo, but we didn’t have a specific location. Then, we heard a rumor that Fūta here would be able to recognize you, so we captured him. But, he invoked Omertà and refused to talk. Furthermore, he closed off his heart, and subsequently lost his ranking abilities.”

“What did you say!?” Tsuna cried.

“So, given no choice,” Renato called out, “you used Namimori’s fighting strength ranking list that Fūta made previously to flush out Tsuna and his family, correct?”

Mukuro sat back, propping his elbows on the low back of the loveseat. “Our plan was a huge success. The Vongola is standing before me right now.”

“How could you do this to innocent Fūta-kun? What do you think people are!?” Tsuna yelled.

“Toys,” Mukuro said calmly, “I suppose.”

“Damn you. You bastard!” Tsuna jumped up, whip in hand, and rushed Mukuro.

The teen stood up. “Do you really think you can go hand-to-hand directly against me?” he asked arrogantly.

Hisui’s sharp eyesight caught that Mukuro’s right eye changed, the oddly-coloured one. Then the boy was beyond Tsuna, a staff in his hand.
Tsuna stopped, then immediately started complaining of pain. His clothing had numerous cuts, but not enough to make his shirt or jeans fall off.

“What’s the matter?” Mukuro asked, looking back over his shoulder.

“Ngh… What the heck happened?”

“He unleashed a terrible onslaught of strikes in the instant he passed by you,” Renato explained.

“Very good,” Mukuro said as he bent down to retrieve the three-pronged blade and fit it to the end of his staff, effectively making the combined weapon a trident. “That’s exactly it.”

Tsuna edged around to stare at his opponent. “His eyes…”

“Oh? You see it, do you? It’s this aura, rather. The aura of hand-to-hand fighting skill emitted by the fourth state, asura. Do you know of the six paths of reincarnation?”

“The cycle of death and rebirth, you mean?” Renato answered. “The states of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, asura, humans, and heaven; which state will you be born into after death?”

“My body has already been through all six paths to Hades in my previous lives, and it has all been carved into my memory. Those six journeys have gained me six fighting skills.”

“What … are you saying?” Tsuna asked.

Mukuro just smiled. “Now then, shall I show you my next skill?” He hit the floor with the end of his trident as he said, “Let us begin.”

At first Hisui could not see anything happening, but Tsuna obviously could. That being so, he allowed a slight bleed-through of illusion.

“What’s this!? The building is—!” Tsuna began to panic, obviously captured by the illusion of parts of the floor exploding upward, of all it breaking apart, of Fūta and Bianchi falling down into some abyss.

Then Renato flung a ball at the kitten and nailed him in the back of the head.

Tsuna reached back to complain, but paused and saw that everything had gone back to normal. “The … floor…”

“What you saw was an illusion.”

“Kufufufu. Not bad. So you saw through it,” Mukuro said. “Yes, that’s the first state, of hell. A skill to break one’s mind through an endless nightmare.” He laughed again, creepily. “But I would like to observe you for a little while more. I have seen the connection between you.” He looked at Hisui briefly, then at Renato. “So you serve the Vongola as mentors, eh?”

Renato scoffed. “We’re home tutors.”

More creepy laughter. “I see. That’s unique, too. However, are the teachers not going to fight? I don’t mind if I have to fight all of you at once.”

Renato shrugged. “It’s against the rules.”

“Oh? Now that’s the reply of a true, traditional mafioso.”
Renato’s brow went up slowly. “There’s no need for us to do anything. At least, not until you have defeated our student.”

“Wha—oi! Ren-san!”

“Oh, what a beautiful and trusting relationship. Interesting. That’s fine with me.” His right eye changed again, to show a different symbol.

Hisui knew it had to be the third path because dozens of snakes appeared around Tsuna, who, predictably, freaked out. “They’re coming,” he whispered.

“Hiiiie! They’re coming! Are these illusions as well?”

“Those are genuine venomous snakes,” Mukuro replied. “If you don’t believe me, try getting bitten by one. This skill is from the third state, of animals. A person driven to death is able to summon living creatures.” He switched focus from Tsuna to them. “Come now, your student’s life is in danger. Is that okay?”

“That’s not much of a plan, Mukuro.”

Just then a tonfa flew through the room toward Mukuro, who quickly deflected it with his trident.

“Jūdaime! Please take cover!” came Hayato’s voice, followed by an explosion around Tsuna. Hayato emerged into the room, supported by Hibari. Both of them looked beat to hell. “Sorry I’m late,” Hayato said.

“Hibari-san! Gokudera-kun! Both… Both of you…”

“Do you understand, Mukuro?” Renato said. “There’s no reason why we would be raising Tsuna alone.”

Hibari tossed Hayato to the side. “Now we’re even,” he muttered.

“What’s this?” Mukuro mused. “Another from the outfield? What is Chikusa doing down there, hm?”

Hayato chuckled darkly. “If you mean the spectacles freak, he’s on the lower floors with the animal freak. They’re having a nice break together.”

“I see.”

“Incredible, Gokudera-kun! But, are you all right?”

“Oh, I wasn’t the one who defeated them, though…”

Hibari started walking forward a bit shakily, and picked up the tonfa he had thrown, so he was properly armed. “Are you ready to repent?” he asked Mukuro.

“What’s this? How frightening.”

“That smile is enough to make most people want to burn his mouth off with acid,” Hisui whispered.

“But please, don’t get in the way of the Vongola and me right now.”

“Yeah, I hear you. But if he looked sullen all the time we’d accuse him of being an emo little shit.”
“For one thing, you shouldn’t even be standing. How many bones in your body have I broken?”

“Are those your final words?”

“Kufufufu. Interesting things you say. Wouldn’t it be better if we made a pact? No choice then.” Mukuro’s eye shifted symbols. “Let’s dispose of you first.” Mukuro dashed forward. “It’ll all be over in an instant!” he promised.

They clashed, and came together. “So, how long does your instant last?” Hibari asked as they pushed back from each other.

“He really is incredibly strong,” Tsuna said. “That’s Hibari-san.”

“Do not take this one lightly, Mukuro,” Renato said. “He’s growing a lot stronger than you think.”

“I see,” Mukuro replied, managing to slice into Hibari’s shoulder. “That’s how it is, then. If he wasn’t injured, the outcome of our duel might be questionable. This is a waste of time. I’m going to finish you off quickly.”

Sakura blossomed into being all around Hibari. Mukuro laughed creepily and said, “Come, kneel before me once again.”

Hibari started moving.

“No!” Tsuna yelled. “Hibari-san!”

Hibari plowed into Mukuro’s torso hard enough to make the teen cough up blood.

Hayato chuckled again. “Yeah, funny, I got this antidote for Sakura-kura from Shamal before we came here. He told me about that unfortunate little illness Hibari coincidentally contracted. So naturally I administered a cure.”

Hibari attacked again while Mukuro was distracted, launching the teen into the air and drawing a fair amount of blood. Mukuro landed heavily, the back of his head bouncing off the floor as his trident clattered down and the blade at the end dislodged and spun off.

“The sakura were an illusion,” Tsuna said to himself.

Hayato made a rude noise. “He snatched all the good scenes,” he muttered.

“It’s over? We can go home now?” Tsuna asked, looking back at them.

“You were wonderfully useless against Mukuro,” Renato replied.

Tsuna made a face and turned away, then rushed over to the prefect. “Hi-Hibari-san, are you all right?”

Hibari toppled forward and hit the floor.

“It must have been very vexing for him to lose that first time,” Renato commented, glancing at Hisui, who frowned and shook his head. “It looked like he was fighting unconsciously since about halfway through.”

“Hibari-san is incredible,” Tsuna said with awe. “We have to hurry and get everyone to a hospital!”

“Don’t worry about that,” Renato said. “The Vongola’s best medical team is on its way here.”
“That’s good to know,” Hayato said, having gotten up despite his wounds.

“Gokudera-kun, you should take it easy for a while,” Tsuna pleaded.

“There’s no need for a medical team,” Mukuro said. He was sitting back up and had a gun aimed their way. “Because there will be no one left alive here.” He laughed creepily, then shot himself in the head.

“He really did it?” Hayato said, eyeing the blood pooling around Mukuro’s head.

“How could he…? Why did he do something like that?” Tsuna asked quietly.

“Perhaps he’d rather die than be captured again,” Renato suggested. To Hisui he whispered, “And that’s the problem, isn’t it? No Vindice.”

He nodded. “It’s what I assume.”

Tsuna suddenly went green and hunched over, a hand clapped to his mouth.

“Finally,” Bianchi said, sitting up. “We’ve defeated Mukuro.”

“Sis!”

“Thank goodness! Bianchi-san has regained consciousness,” Tsuna said.

Renato furrowed his brow. “Take it easy.”

“She lost enough blood…” he whispered.

“Lend me your shoulder, won’t you?” Bianchi said to Hayato.

“Do I have to?”

“Just… Just for today, okay?” she said.

Tsuna suddenly freaked. “Gokudera-kun! Don’t go closer!”

“Eh?”

“What’s wrong?” Bianchi asked. “Tsuna, lend me your shoulder, too.”

“It’s all right, Jūdaiime,” Hayato said. “My injuries aren’t that serious. I’m okay.” To Bianchi he said, “Give me your hand.”

“Okay.” And then she sliced his face with a three-pronged blade and tried to gut him.

“Wha-what are you doing!?” Hayato screeched, falling back on his ass.

“Oh my, what’s with me?” Bianchi said, bringing one hand to her mouth.

“What are you doing, Bianchi?” Renato asked, eyeing her oddly. “You just cut your own brother.”

“What have I done…” she said softly. “I wonder!” she cried, and lunged at Renato, who nimbly skipped out of the way.

“Mind control again?” Tsuna asked.
“No.” Renato shook his head. “More like possession.”

“Then… It’s a curse?” Hayato asked.

“What are you saying?” Bianchi said. “It’s me.” Her smile was unsettling.

“Rokudo … Mukuro?” Tsuna said, his eyes wide.

Bianchi laughed creepily; her right eye changed from grey-green to red and that side of her face almost looked as though it had fractured. “And so, we meet again.”

Renato gave him a look, which he returned with a frown. “They were destroyed,” he whispered. “Right?”

Renato nodded and looked back at Bianchi. “It shouldn’t exist.”

“There are still things I have to do,” she said. “So I have returned from the depths of hell.”

“Jūdaime! Leave this to me,” Hayato insisted, then starting chanting an exorcism rite. Bianchi collapsed thirty seconds later.

Then Hayato tried to stab Tsuna with that blade, though he missed. “You really surprise me. This is a first. No human has ever been able to sense with one look when I’m possessing another. You truly are absolutely fascinating.”

Renato sighed. “He pretended to commit suicide by shooting himself with that bullet. The Possession Bullet was forbidden. They should all have been destroyed. Where did you get it?”

“Possession Bullet?” Tsuna said. “What are you saying?”

“Kufufufu. So you’ve noticed. Yes, this possession is due to that special bullet.”

“Special like a Dying Will Bullet?” Tsuna asked.

“Yes. The Possession Bullet, as its name implies, allows the one its used on to possess another’s body and control it with his will. It’s said it was discovered by the Estraneo Famiglia. To handle it well requires not just a strong spirit, but also an affinity with the bullet. However, its use was deemed so inhuman that the mafia world declared it forbidden, and destroyed its manufacturing instructions.”

The possessed Hayato smiled that creepy smile. “It cannot be compared to mind control. This is complete possession—from the top of his head to his toes, they’re all in my power. In other words, this body … is mine.”

“Stop!” Tsuna cried. “Stop it!”

“You ensnared Lancia the same way,” Renato said. “Why do you have any?”

“Because it belongs to me. And that’s enough talking. Come on, it’s your turn to be possessed next, Vongola Decimo.”

“So this is your real objective?” Renato asked.

“It’s not an objective, it’s a means. Once I have him in my hands, my vengeance can begin.”

Tsuna went into another meltdown of protests.
“Watch out for that blade,” Renato suggested. “If you’re cut by it, he’ll be able to possess you.”

“You know quite a bit,” Hayato said, sending the blade in a controlled spin to Bianchi, who caught it easily.

“That’s exactly right,” she said as Hayato collapsed, then crouched down next to Hibari. “For example, if I were to do this—” She cut the prone prefect with the blade. “—it’s like saying, ‘I will possess this one.’”

She dropped as Hibari levered himself up. Tsuna took a tonfa blow to the stomach, but Hibari collapsed immediately. “Oho, this body can’t be used anymore,” he said, trying to get back up. “That he could actually fight in this condition… What a frightening man, Hibari Kyoya…” Then he collapsed.

“Be careful,” he reminded Tsuna. “He can still possess Hayato-kun or Bianchi-chan.”

Both of them stood as Kakimoto and Jōshima came through the entrance.

“Those two as well,” Renato said and hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve never heard of four people simultaneously.”

“That’s not all!” Hayato said as his right eye changed symbols, then he threw dynamite.

Tsuna bolted out of the way of the explosion as Kakimoto went after Renato, while Jōshima went for Hisui.

“The second state,” Hayato said, “of hungry ghosts. A skill to steal the abilities of others.” More dynamite went flying at Tsuna, who lunged away and face-planted as a result.

Bianchi laughed and started in with illusions to harry Tsuna.

“If possible I would rather capture you unharmed,” Jōshima said.

“It’ll be better if you just surrender yourself,” Kakimoto added.

Tsuna freaked out.

“You never learn, do you?” Renato said and sighed. “That’s an illusion.”

“Oho! As for you,” Hayato said, “you should worry about yourself!” More dynamite flew, at Renato that time.

Kakimoto dashed in with the blade and stabbed it down. His glee was cut short when he realized all he managed to stab was a hat.

“It’s been a while since I’ve experienced a real fight,” Renato commented dryly. “And here I am, still waiting.”

“Ren-san!”

“You better hurry up and do something, Tsuna,” Renato said. “I’m not going to fight in your place.”

“Stop saying things like that! I’ve already surpassed the level of everything I can do!!”

“Always with the yelling,” he complained. “Stop whining, and get on with it.”
Bianchi laughed. “The teacher is getting impatient. Having your student driven to a desperate and dangerous situation has made you illogical!” She leaped at Hisui to attack with the blade.

He darted away, deliberately not using flame-enhanced speed.

“Tsuna,” Renato said calmly, “your older brother Dino was also on a path to surpass himself, remember? He was caught in a desperate situation, as well. When he was able to overcome that he changed from ‘Greenhorn Dino’ to ‘Bucking Horse Dino’.”

“Turned into, you say, but I don’t understand! Besides, Dino-san and I are—”

“Look up!”

Tsuna looked up just in time for the dynamite to explode, knocking him some distance.

“Come, we’ve talked more than enough. Let’s end this,” Kakimoto said, and lifted the blade as the symbol in his right eye shifted. Then he attacked; but he collapsed half way to Tsuna, the blade spinning off to Jōshima.

“This always happens,” Jōshima said, taking possession of the trident blade. “How many times now? It doesn’t matter if I can possess and control a body. If the body has been broken, it still can’t move.”

“…That’s why you couldn’t possess Hibari?” Tsuna asked.

Kakimoto laughed creepily. “Looks like Chikusa can still move a little, hm?”

“He’s being forced to get up? His injuries!”

“It’s fine,” Kakimoto said, managing to stand. He looked at Tsuna. “Because, I can’t feel any pain at all.”

“What!? What are you saying!? That body belongs to your friend, doesn’t it!?”

“Incorrect. Since I’ve possess him, this body is mine. I can break or kill this body at my whim,” Kakimoto said matter-of-factly.

“Wha… That’s … not right.”

“Do you have time to worry about others?” Hayato asked.

“You’re facing certain doom yourself,” Bianchi said.

“As interesting a boy as you are, you were never cut out to join the mafia,” Hayato said.

Tsuna took a good look at the two and cringed. “I beg you! Please stop! If you keep doing this they’ll die!”

Hayato laughed. “I just remembered. During the fight with Birds you were ready to stab yourself in order to save your girlfriend, right? Let’s go with that, then. It’s because of that naivety that I will possess you.”

“Is this okay?” Bianchi said. “If your friends are injured further…”

“Stop escaping and start cooperating like a good boy. Give yourself to the contract,” Hayato said.

“No… No way…”
“So, you’re really wavering,” Jōshima replied. “Wherever you go, this world has no place for people like you. You are not suited to be the Vongola Decimo. Come, surrender your body to me."

“What should I do?” Tsuna asked, looking at them pleadingly. “What should we do?”

“We aren’t going to do anything,” Renato replied. “Figure out something yourself.”

Tsuna’s face fell. “How could you… Haven’t you always helped me!? Don’t abandon me now!”

Renato lashed out and gave Tsuna a hard cuff to the head. “Don’t squeal like some pathetic pig!” he said sharply, then reached out to grab him by the shirt and pull his face closer. “You, and nobody else, are the Vongola Jūdaime. If you voice your true feelings, that is the answer of a Vongola.” He let go and stepped back, out of the way again.

“My … true feelings?”

Jōshima laughed. “Even the tutor has given up, eh? His true feelings are, ‘I want to run away.’ Aren’t they? Or is it, ‘I can’t run away because of my friends’?”

“…want to…” Tsuna mumbled. “I want to … defeat Mukuro.”

He looked sidelong as saw Leon’s cocoon form swell.

“Oho, that was unexpected,” Jōshima said. “But let’s hear it at a more leisurely pace after I possess you. After you bury your friends with your own hands.”

“…I don’t want to lose … to such a cruel person,” Tsuna said quietly, then looked up and shouted. “Just you! I want to defeat you!”

Jōshima lifted the blade. “This is the end.”

Leon blimped up and filaments extended in all directions, even as high as the ceiling. Leon rose up slowly, shifting the length of the filaments to effect a change in height for his main body.

“Vongola!” Jōshima shouted. “What are you doing!?”

“I’m not—Leon!?”

“It’s about time,” Renato murmured. “It was the same back then, when Dino became the ‘Bucking Horse’.”

“Oh, so this is your doing,” Jōshima said, eyeing Renato.

Renato shook his head. “Nope. It’s Leon’s doing. He does this when my students grow stronger. We knew a trial was coming when he went into a cocoon state.”

Kakimoto laughed. “How interesting.”

“Here I was wondering what you were going to show me right at the end,” Hayato said, “but it’s just your pet with … what … wings?”

“You guys are really unique,” Bianchi said and laughed.

“This is a joke?” Tsuna said disbelievingly. “What is Leon doing? How can this have anything to do with Dino-san getting stronger?”
“Just watch,” Renato said as Leon grew even larger. “He’s about to disgorge a new item. Something especially for you, Tsuna, to use. During Dino’s time he disgorged a whip and Enzo.”

Tsuna got a look of horror on his face. “Enzo is Leon’s child!?”

“I can’t put up with your games forever,” Jōshima said. “This little break is over. Let’s finish this up!” He started forward, causing Renato to kick Tsuna out of the way, and sliced that blade right through Leon.

“Don’t worry,” Hisui told a panicking Tsuna. “He is a shape-changing chameleon, after all.”

“More importantly, something has been ejected upward,” Renato added.

Tsuna looked up in time to be hit in the face with the wool gloves Leon had stolen weeks ago. He grabbed them and took a look. “Eh? What? These are—? How am I supposed to fight with these!? Wasn’t he supposed to make a weapon or something like Enzo? How does improving my hands’ blood circulation help!?”


“Even at the end, you guys are just so amusing,” Jōshima commented. He lunged forward. Tsuna brought his covered hands up in defense and was knocked back from the blade’s impact.

Leon pulled himself together and ambled over to Renato, and up his leg.

“He repelled the attack?” Jōshima said disbelievingly.

“S-saved,” Tsuna said from the floor, then looked at his left hand. “There’s something inside?” He pulled off the glove long enough to shake a bullet free.

“Ah. Pass it here, Tsuna,” Renato said.

“I am not going to let you shoot that!” Jōshima said and lunged at Renato.

As he evaded that attack, and one from Bianchi, Renato snagged the bullet from Tsuna’s hand. “Get that glove back on,” he said as he nimbly moved away. “Never seen one like this before,” he lied, getting out his gun. “We’ll just have to shoot it and see what happens.”

“Not going to happen, yo.” Dynamite arced up and over Tsuna’s head. “What I said about collecting your body unharmed? Forget that.”

Renato got the bullet into a magazine and loaded in his gun; he aimed.

“Are you going to make it?” Hayato asked, an eerily calm smile on his face.

Renato fired; the dynamite exploded all around Tsuna.

“You got him with the bombs,” Bianchi said with satisfaction.

“He’s seriously injured now,” Jōshima said.

‘This is like watching multiple personalities separate,’ he thought. ‘Because really, it’s kind of creepy having a single person speaking through multiple bodies and acting like they’re individuals. Is his possession really so complete?’

“There doesn’t seem to be any effect from this bullet,” Hayato said. “Even the special bullet has
“That’s all, then,” Kakimoto said. “The finale came too quickly in the end. Come, let’s possess this body while it still has breath.”

Tsuna just lay there, but slowly his eyes opened enough to see them. ‘Come on, kitten. Do something! Don’t just lie there like you have no fire or will. Don’t make a mockery of the training we’ve put you through, or the people who care about you. How can we be expected to keep helping you if you refuse to even try to help yourself?’

“Oho, at a time like this, you still have spirit in your eyes?” Kakimoto said. “But, it’s still time to end the show. If you die here it’ll be problematic for me!”

Tsuna caught the blade and it came down. Then his gloves morphed into something other than wool. Leather? Metal. A band around each wrist. He snapped one of the prongs. “Mukuro… If I don’t defeat you… Even if I’m dying, I won’t give up!” Flames ignited on his forehead and Tsuna got up into a partial crouch, then stood.

Kakimoto jumped back and eyed Tsuna. “That aura on your forehead… I see, you were hit by the special bullet after all. But you seemed a lot more fired up in the fight with Lancia earlier.”

“The Rebuke Bullet brings out a calm fighting will,” Renato said.

“Pfft. All I see is a person who’s lost his fighting will, or a spirit which has sunk into despair,” Kakimoto said. “Either way, you are not a match for my skills.”

Jōshima lunged at Tsuna from behind, but Tsuna calmly reached back without looking and slammed him in the face, halting his motion, and then pushed him back so hard he flew a short distance.

“Not so fast,” Kakimoto said. His yo-yos came out, arced around, and set free a forest of needles.

Tsuna gazed around apathetically, then darted off to the side, to a seemingly empty spot, and nailed an invisible Kakimoto with his fist.

“Impossible,” said Hayato.

“He couldn’t see the illusions of the hell state before,” Bianchi said.

Hayato’s eyes narrowed briefly. “Oho, this is still your friend’s body. Can you really strike at me?” He moved in for the attack, as did Bianchi. Tsuna handled their attacks defensively, letting Mukuro wear those bodies out, then lashed out with a strike that temporarily paralyzed Hayato. He did the same to Bianchi.

“Sorry about the wait,” Tsuna said. “Will you two look after them?”

“Putting on airs now, are we?” came Mukuro’s voice.

Tsuna stood up and turned around. “Show yourself. You’re still alive.”

“Pfft. Your sense for battle has improved markedly, I’ll give you that. But you’re pushing your luck if you think this is all it takes.”

He and Renato moved forward to drag the siblings away toward one of the walls.

“Out of the six battle skills I posses, there’s one more I haven’t shown you, remember?”

failed, eh?”
“The fifth path, of humans,” Renato said over his shoulder.

“Exactly. This world that we’re living in is the state of humans. Furthermore, among the six states, it is the ugliest and most dangerous world. I’m not being cynical. Because I hate this world, I hate this skill the most. If possible, I would rather not have used it.” He reached up and hovered his index finger near his right eye, then jammed it in. Blood spurted, among other things. When he removed his finger the eye was still whole. “It’s the most dangerous skill,” he said, his entire body lighting up with an aura.

The fight went badly at first for Tsuna; he was slammed into a wall in practically no time flat. Mukuro laughed happily, but the sound cut off abruptly. “What!? His aura exploded?”

Tsuna brought his hands up to his forehead and set his gloves on fire. “If that was the extent of your power, I’m very disappointed.”

“Kufufufu. I am going to have some god damn fun with you.”

“Huh. The gloves are made of the same material as a Dying Will Bullet,” Renato murmured.

“It’s not so different from Dino’s whip,” he murmured back.

“You’re like a cat that tries to make itself look bigger by bristling its fur,” Mukuro said dismissively. “But even if you change the appearance of your aura, there’s no meaning to it.”

“The Dying Will Flame isn’t an aura,” Tsuna said calmly.

“Oh, what an interesting thing you say. Then will you … show it to me!?”

Tsuna caught the staff as it came down and melted the end right off.

Mukuro jumped back. “Tch. Those gloves are like hot iron.”

“Not only that,” Tsuna said, and launched forward, then disappeared; Mukuro swiped at thin air. Tsuna reappeared behind Mukuro and attacked again, though Mukuro spun around in time to try to block. Even so, he went flying half way across the room. “Are you done warming up yet?”

Mukuro laughed, almost hysterically. “All of this is a delightful miscalculation. If I can get your body, I won’t even need to gather resources to cause a conflict within the mafia because I can barge directly into the famiglia.”

“So your goal is conflict in the mafia?” Renato asked.

“No way… I’m not petty like that. I plan to possess VIPs from all over the world soon. Then I’ll control them and change this ugly world into a pure and beautiful sea of blood. A world of war… Does that sound too fake? But first has got to be the mafia… The annihilation of the mafia.”

“Why are you so fixated on the mafia?” Hisui asked.

“A grudge?” Tsuna asked.

“Oh, I don’t plan to talk any further. You will become a part of me when I’m in my ultimate form. Just watch!” Something separated from Mukuro and pressed forward on the attack.

Tsuna just watched it come, not moving, and was subsequently surprised to be hit; he grunted in pain.
“He was hiding stones within the illusion,” Renato said. “You underestimated things, Tsuna.”

Mukuro went on the attack again while Tsuna was gingerly touching his face, but Tsuna saw or felt it coming and warped around behind Mukuro when he landed and nailed him in the face again, hard enough to send him half way across the room.

Mukuro pretended defeat and asked Tsuna to kill him; Tsuna refused. Mukuro got back up with amazing speed and came up behind Tsuna, grabbing his arms and pulling them back. “Do you know why I had so many assassins target you? So that I could possess you after you drew out your abilities. Good work. You may—rest now!” he said, letting go and kicking Tsuna toward a wall where a trident blade was sticking out.

“Tsuna!” Renato called. “Show the power of those gloves now!”

Tsuna thrust his hands back a bit and halted himself mid-air, just out of range of the blade.

“What!? Firing the flame backward?”

Tsuna flared them again, launching himself forward too quickly for Mukuro to react. A hand landed on Mukuro’s face and held, even as he kept forward momentum; the aura from Mukuro’s fifth state drained away. When he let go Mukuro crashed into the wall hard enough to crumble that section before he hit the floor.

“The Dying Will Flame has purified Mukuro’s dark aura…”

Tsuna half-knelt beside Mukuro and hovered his still flaming hand over the teen’s face. The trident blade in the wall shattered.

Hisui was on his phone texting the medical team a heartbeat later. “It seems to be over for real this time,” he remarked.

“Yeah…” Tsuna’s flames sputtered out. “Ah! Everyone’s wounds!”

Hisui looked up from the acknowledgment and said, “They’re already on their way.” He paused to look at the screen, then said, “And they saved Lancia when I called them in earlier.”

“Thank goodness.” Tsuna heaved a sigh of relief, then looked back at Mukuro. “He’s not dead, right? He’ll be fine, right?”

Renato sighed. “You’re too kind, sometimes.”

“Don’t get any closer!”

“You mafiosi, don’t touch Mukuro-san!” Jōshima wheezed.

“They don’t have any strength left to walk, Tsuna,” Renato said.

“Why? Why do you do so much for Mukuro? You guys were possessed and used by him.”

“Don’t speak as if you know anything,” Kakimoto said.

“This is nothing for us compared to our suffering back then,” Jōshima said. “We were guinea pigs for human testing by our own famiglia.”

Renato sighed. “I thought as much. I doubted, but… You guys were part of the Estraneo, weren’t you, those who created the forbidden bullet.”
“Forbidden?” Jōshima said, getting to his hands and knees. “You guys just labeled it that for your own convenience. Thanks to that, our famiglia members were labeled as brutes and were horribly persecuted by other mafiosi. As soon as anyone stepped outside they were killed like bugs. But that just stimulated the adults even more in continuing the experiments to invent special weapons.

“Our friends died one by one. Every day was hell… But he, all by himself, he destroyed that miserable life. He was quiet and not the kind who stood out. I think that was the first time I heard him speak. That time, for the first time since birth, there was a place to go for us. And … we can’t have you destroy that!”

“But,” Tsuna said, “I, as well, can’t just stay quiet when my friends get hurt, since that’s the place for me to go.”

Sound at the building entrance had him glance back; the medical team had entered. At the same moment Jōshima cried out. Hisui’s head whipped back to see that the Vindice had arrived, finally.

“What—!?“

More collars went out to encircle the necks of Kakimoto and Rokudo.

“What a quick appearance,” Renato said flatly.

“W-who are they?” Tsuna whispered.

“Vindice. They are enforcers of the commandments in the mafia world and they try those who cannot be tried by the law.”

Tsuna stepped forward as the lead Vindice started hauling back on the chains it held. “Wait… What are you doing!?”

“Don’t, Tsuna,” he said. “Just leave it be. You do not want to get mixed up with the Vindice.”

“They’re that scary? What will happen to those three?”

He rolled his eyes. “Comprehension, kitten! They’ll be put on trial for their crimes and punished.”

“But what kind of punishment?”

He shrugged. “No idea. Hey, Tsuna-kun, you fought well.” More noise had him looking back; the medical team had arrived at the theatre. They quickly got Hayato, Bianchi, Fūta, and Hibari onto gurneys. They followed them out, Hisui helping to get the gurneys down the broken stairways, to the outside. Takeshi was on a gurney, already in one of the vans.

“What about Lancia-san?” Tsuna asked.

“After getting the antidote he was taken away by the Vindice,” one of the medics informed him.

“No way!” Tsuna said in protest, then looked to where his friends were being loaded into the vans.

“Will they be okay?”

“They’re top class medics,” Renato said.

“Everyone…” Then Tsuna crumpled, emitting surprised sounds of pain. “What is this!? My entire body hurts—all my muscles?”

“Eh, well, the Rebuke Bullet’s battle mode abuses the body severely,” Renato said with a faint smile.
“The burden on the body comes back as pain,” he added as Tsuna collapsed entirely, twitching, and lost consciousness. “Sad.”

“Looks like we’ll have to keep pushing stamina,” he said as medics hefted Tsuna onto a gurney.

Tsuna had been something of a bundle of contradictions once he was released by the Vongola medics. He was so absurdly grateful that Shamal and Hisui had intervened to save the very much innocent Kyoko, Hana, and Haru, but unwilling to fully accept that they had killed to do so.

“But why kill them?”

He sighed. “Kitten, those two were notorious serial killers. They had absolutely no respect for human life. They were imprisoned at Vindicare for their crimes, a prison that is extremely difficult to escape from. The first thing they did, even on the way out, was kill. They killed again once they were away. They were about to kill again. Can you honestly tell me they deserved to live? What if Ren-kun and I hadn’t tipped Shamal off because we had suspicions and wanted to cover our bases, just in case? What if we hadn’t gotten there in time?”

Tsuna looked like he wanted to cry.

“Can you agree that there are some people worth saving?”

Tsuna nodded.

“Then you have to agree that some people aren’t.”

“What? Why?”

“Because for every thing there is an opposite. Someone who has completely cast off their humanity and hasn’t the least bit of respect for life… Well, they don’t really deserve to live as a human any longer. And when they reincarnate, perhaps they’ll come back as something where they’re the prey, and maybe that experience will etch itself onto their soul, so that when they reincarnate as a human again, they’ll be a better person. Maybe they’ll come back as mice. Or carrots.”

Tsuna looked horrified for a moment, then snickered. He immediately brought a hand up to cover his mouth with a disturbed expression.

“If it’s a choice between someone that vile dying and never being able to kill again in that lifetime, or the death of an innocent, I will always choose to kill the aggressor if I can get away with it. It’s one fewer psycho on the streets killing people who were just going about their day. And believe me, kitten, the people I’ve killed were all far too thrilled at being able to mess people up. It made them feel special, powerful, god-like.”

“You don’t feel that way?” Tsuna asked daringly.

His brow went up. “Interesting. Showing some spine. No, I don’t. I have a job and I do it. I’ve been doing that job since I was fourteen. Do I seem like a delusional psycho to you? I doubt I could get the evil laugh thing down, either. I don’t laugh much in the first place.”

Tsuna eyed him oddly. “Why not?”

“Because my ability to feel emotions was damaged when I was barely a year old,” he said honestly. “It took a long time—well, until I met Ren-kun, actually—for me to feel much of anything. The only
person I gave a damn about was your mother, because she was the only one to give a damn about me, essentially. That’s why I’ve always protected her.”

Tsuna was quiet for a while, but finally said, “Is that part of why you’ve always been so scary?”

He chuckled. “You’ve always been a squeak toy, kitten.”

Tsuna made an offended face.

“It’s true,” he said. “Be sure to soak for a while tonight. The hot water will help. You can have an hour at the hospital after classes, but then I expect you to be here, ready to work.”

The others were getting the best of medical attention at the hospital, but that was mundane in nature. The Vongola medics had sped things along considerably with the efforts of the Suns on the team. Tsuna would not have to visit them there for very long.

The next day he was back to being a slave driver. “Come on, kitten,” he said, “pick up the pace! You did well in that fight once you got going, but that’s no reason to slack off. You don’t get better if you don’t try, if you don’t push yourself beyond your current limits! Do you really want me to use you as a pincushion?”

Tsuna wailed and started jogging faster.

It hadn’t taken long for Tsuna to recover for the most part, but he was prone to stiffness. That was partly helped by the soaks each night, but also by running him into the ground again, to work out the kinks. “The better you do this way, the less of an effect when you go into Hyper Dying Will Mode, kitten,” he called out. “You won’t come out of it wishing you were dead. And now that you’ve experienced it we can work with that.”

“What do you mean,” Tsuna gasped.

“You can extend it, kitten. Five minutes is only the limit when you’re fully switched on the whole time. If you can learn to control the amount of flame you’re emitting you can extend the limit quite a bit. But to get to that point, you need to keep building up your stamina. Not every fight is won in five minutes. Well, preferably, you’ll pop up behind whoever it is and sucker punch them into unconsciousness, but we can’t count on being that lucky every time.”

“Right,” Tsuna wheezed.

“And I’d like to remind you that you’ve had two instances of assassins coming after you already!”

Tsuna groaned and slowed down to a fast walk so he could sip his sports drink without flinging it everywhere. “How come you aren’t doing this to the others?”

“Technically, that isn’t our job. But we have been helping here and there. Now, if one of them were to directly ask for help? Different story.”

Tsuna stopped for a moment and looked at him directly. “Why does Lambo-kun come over here so often?”

Hisui flicked a senbon at him. “You know better than to stop. And why are you asking about Lambo-kun?”

“He seems a lot calmer lately.”
“Yes, well, I’ve been teaching him a few things, such as reading and writing Japanese, other languages, and making sure he has someone to talk to.”

“Huh?”

He rolled his eyes. “Half the reason Lambo-kun is so … him … is because no one ever just listens to him and takes him seriously. Yes, he’s five, but he’s also very clever and quite intelligent.”

Tsuna threw him a skeptical look.

“Well, kitten, can you say you could learn the entirety of Japanese writing systems in five months, at five years old, to go along with your spoken fluency in the language? Because Lambo-kun can, and did. Now, back to jogging. You’ve had enough of a break.”

On Saturday they went over to the Sawada home and shooed everyone away. Nana went off to enjoy herself in town, and the children and Bianchi were sent elsewhere. Tsuna finally stumbled downstairs and into the kitchen. He was half way to the refrigerator before he noticed it was just the two of them at the table. “Everyone’s out?” He got a drink from the refrigerator and turned back. “It’s nice to have a quiet morning once in a while.”

“We chased them out on purpose,” Renato said.

“Eh?” Tsuna said as he sat down.

“We decided to do something nice for you today.”

“What are you saying all of a sudden,” Tsuna muttered, jabbing a straw into his juice box and taking a sip. “Something nice? It’s kind of creepy.”

Renato smiled innocently and slid some tickets across the table. “Take a look at these. It’s okay to relax once in a while.”

“The zoo?” Tsuna shot them each a disbelieving look.

“I’ve already arranged everything,” Renato said, back to reading the paper.

Tsuna’s expression twisted. “I’m grateful for the thought, but why the zoo…?”

And then the doorbell rang. Tsuna set his drink down and went to answer it. “Good morning, Tsuna-kun,” they heard.

“Kyoko-chan! M-morning.”

“She’s going to the zoo with you,” Renato called out, “of course.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it!” she said enthusiastically. “I’m so excited right now, so please understand if I’m being too loud.”

Shortly thereafter the two were off. Renato and Hisui followed, unseen, and amused themselves by watching Tsuna’s attempts to dodge the rest of the household sans Nana. He stiffened just as an explosion ripped through the area, and touched Renato’s forearm. “I need to go.” He sped off a second later and apparated the second he was in the clear. Ants had started crawling up his spine again, but it was not connected to anyone at the zoo; it was Nana.

A quick charm told him approximately where she was which, when he caught up to her, happened to be about to turn into an alley that would make her walk home shorter. Trailing her was a rough-
looking fellow, foreign, and doing his best to look casual and not the least bit interested in Nana.

Hisui waited until his friend had turned the corner before he acted. There were people in the vicinity, so he had to use different tactics. A charm was cast on the guy to make people stop noticing him, and only then did he speed up to intercept the man as he turned into the alley. Another quick charm knocked the guy unconscious. He grabbed hold of the man and sped off again, apparating to the Mountain of Death the moment it was safe to do so.

Once there he created an obsidian blindfold for the guy and plastered him to the ground. He materialized a blade and removed the spell that kept the man out of it. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Wha—? Where am I? What happened? Why can’t I see?”

‘Great. This one sounds fairly new,’ he thought. ‘But maybe that’ll make questioning him easier.’ He kicked the man in the ribs. “Who are you?” If necessary, he could use magical illusions to give himself a different appearance so he could try Legilimency, though he had not spent enough time on it to feel comfortable using it.

The fellow seemed to realize the situation he was in at that point and clammed up. His mouth went tight and his lips were a grim slash across his face.

Hisui crouched down and slid the tip of his blade under the man’s thumbnail, then yanked up. After the man’s cries of pain dropped to whimpering he asked again, “Who are you?” Ten minutes later and as many lost fingernails the guy finally said his name was “Orso”. ‘Maybe I should just staple this guy to the ground and go get Ren.’

On that thought he knocked the guy out again, put on his earpiece, and tapped it. A second later he heard a quiet, “Where are you, tesoro?”

“Our favorite training ground,” he replied. “Got an assassin here with me who was mincing along behind Nana-chan. I was considering asking you to assist me, since this guy does not want to talk.”

“And I’m better at interrogations, right. Eh… Let me make sure the kitten gets home safely. Soon as that’s done, you can come get me.”

“All right.” He pulled a book out of his pouch and sat down to read, keeping an eye out for any creatures who might decide to make a meal of his prisoner.

An hour later he was interrupted by, “I’m home.”

He closed the book and tucked it away, then materialized some “staples” to hold the man pinned to the earth, on top of what he was already doing, and got up. He apparated to the house, where Renato was waiting, took the offered arm, and apparated again.

“So who’s our new friend?”

He tapped the earpiece to deactivate it and tucked it away before saying, “All I could get out of him was the name Orso, and I doubt even that much,” he said quietly. “I don’t know if he was after Nana-chan specifically or…?”

Renato nodded. “Pull stakes and just keep him down the usual way?”

He released the staples, but left the blindfold in place, and reasserted his gravitational hold on the man. After he removed the spell to keep the man unconscious he nodded at his lover. “Have at it.”
His lover was meticulous and exacting; this was not a Death Eater or magical bully boy, after all. Two hours later they had learned that the assassin was one Guido Orso Bonetti, of the Tagliare Famiglia. Iemitsu had done something personally to piss off the Tagliare, and they had learned through various means that Iemitsu had a wife and son. That the son was next in line to be head of the Vongola only made it better in their minds. Thus, the assassin sent off to torture Nana for information about her son and then kill her, and also to take out Tsuna.

“You know, I’m thinking we should just hand this asshole over to Antonio and let Nono deal with it,” Renato said after a short break. “Sure, we can kill the guy, but it’s bigger than just one assassin.”

He nodded and got out his phone, sending a text to their contact. Within minutes they had a bit of a conversation going, and Antonio agreed to meet them on the outskirts of Kyoto with transportation for the prisoner in two hours. Hisui spent part of that time writing up a transcript from memory of the interrogation so they had something to go with their gift.

When it was close to time he stapled the prisoner down again and transported Renato to the meeting spot, then went back for Bonetti. Antonio arrived in a van with tinted windows, and with a few friends. They quickly secured the prisoner so that Hisui could remove his materialized bindings and hustled the immobilized fellow into the back.

Antonio read through the transcript while they did that, a sneer developing the further along he got. He looked up and said, “Thank you for bringing him to me. I wouldn’t have blamed you for just killing him, but this was a better solution overall. Nono will get to the bottom of this, and enact any necessary retribution. I contacted him the moment we finished our chat and he approved the plan. I already know you will, but please continue to keep an eye out.”

They said their good-byes and watched as Antonio and his crew drove away, then slipped into cover and apparated back to their house. Renato sent off a message to Nono, essentially asking him, “Your thoughts on letting Tsuna know about the assassin?”

“If you feel it would be of benefit to his continued growth,” was the eventual response.

He sighed and sat back. “Maybe we should save it until the next time he balks for real? Then again, telling him might stiffen up that spine some more, if he feels there’s an honest danger to his mother.”

Renato shook his head. “No, let’s go with the former. True, telling him now might have the effect we want, but it might also send him off in a downward spiral of anxiety. And as gifted as Nana can be at ignoring the obvious, even she would notice at some point that Tsuna’s behavior went wacky to the extreme.”

“All right. But I want to start taking him to the real training ground, then. Maybe Hayato-kun as well. Takeshi-kun is all about kendo and still hasn’t been able to let go of the delusion that this is all a game. Ryohei-kun is so ‘extreme’ that I doubt he can keep his mouth shut.”

“Not even with compulsions?”

“Yes, I could do that, but—okay, how about this? We put compulsions on Tsuna-kun and Hayato-kun regarding anything magical I do. I’m thinking apparation, basically, since everything else is easy enough to hide or explain away. We take those two and put them through the wringer at the Mountain of Death. Stamina, climbing, hand-to-hand—because if for some reason Hayato-kun is ever without his dynamite and can’t use flames, what does he have? And if they get going well, we can see about bringing the other two in.”

Renato nodded. “I’ll ask Hayato to come with Tsuna, then.”
Monday afternoon his lover arrived with both boys in tow and Hisui quietly compelled the both of them, setting it deep into their minds. It was not the sort of thing he liked to do, especially to allies, but neither of them were technically subject to Omertà, never having killed anyone. “We’re going on a little trip, you two,” he said, then latched onto Hayato and apparated. He let go of the boy and apparated back, knowing Hayato would be too busy suffering the effects to get into trouble.

Tsuna was next, the transport more than enough to wipe the confusion off his face, and then he went back and got Renato, who smiled sharply and said, “All right, my adorable little students! It’s time to have some fun. See that cliff?”

“You mean the huge one we can’t help but notice?” Tsuna muttered, then flinched back when Renato turned that smile on him specifically.

“Yes, that one. You two are going to work on your stamina, of course, and that involves learning to climb this cliff. I would tell you how long it took Dino to do it properly, but that wouldn’t be fair. And, as you’ve no doubt noticed, there is a lovely deep pond here for you to fall into when you inevitably muck things up at first.”

When neither of them moved Hisui materialized senbon and flicked them. “Well? Get moving!”

Sadly, they did not do any better than Dino had. It took them a week to make it to the top and, when they managed it, they both collapsed and complained of rubbery muscles. Hisui stood it for all of ten minutes before chivying them up and into a jog around the path. “If you just lie there your muscles will freeze up solid and you’ll regret it!”

It would take some time, but once they were up to speed the two of them could tack other things onto the end of the initial climb and warm up.

“He hit a home run!” Tsuna practically screamed as Takeshi ran the bases. “He’s impressive!”

“The opposition team is struggling against Yamamoto?” Hayato muttered. He got up, dynamite in his hands, and yelled, “If you guys don’t work hard, I’ll start a riot!”

“That’s not what you’re here for,” Tsuna cried.

“Calm down, octopus head,” Ryohei said. “There are other things to do while watching sports.”

“Eh?”

Ryohei brought his hands up to cup his mouth and yelled, “Why don’t you quit baseball and do boxing!?"

“That’s wrong, too!” Tsuna complained.

“Quit being stupid, lawn head!”

“Don’t be so easy, octopus head! Even if I’m stupid, I’m stupid for boxing!”

“You’re gonna admit your stupidity!?"

“The foul ball went—”

Bianchi appeared behind them and caught it, then sat down. “I brought lunch.”
Hayato went down and cracked his head on Bianchi’s tier.

“Why does this always happen?” Tsuna asked with a heavy sigh, then his gaze started darting around.

Renato eyed him for a moment, but looked away when Tsuna went to Hayato’s side when the boy threw up. Hisui followed his gaze and saw a young boy holding the hand of a woman.

“Mi-kun, big brother was working hard,” the woman said. “What should we make him for dinner to celebrate?”

“Ano… Hamburger!”

“Figures,” he muttered, as the boy looked back and showed signs of possession. One red eye was a bit hard to miss, after all, and the fracturing of that side of the face. Something told him that inactives couldn’t see the changes.

“We just had hamburger yesterday, remember? Let’s do that some other time.”

“Okay!”

They exchanged a look. “He’s clever and persistent, I’ll give him that.”
“Now that’s bad news,” Renato said, glancing up from his computer.

“What now?”

“Xanxus somehow freed himself, or was freed, and he knows about the kitten. He learns his brothers are dead, thinks he’s next in line, only to find out he’s been bypassed. This is not going to be fun.”

“Eh, I’m missing something here, but then I never paid much attention to politics in the first place.”

Renato shrugged. “Yes. When there are multiple contenders for the position there can be scuffles. Obviously, Nono chose Tsuna as his successor, but Xanxus might kick up one hell of a fuss. Still, so long as he and Iemitsu agree on the choice, it’s a moot point for the most part.”

“No, you lost me. I know Iemitsu-san is the head of CEDEF, but what does that mean in this hypothetical situation?”

“CEDEF is, at its heart, an intelligence organization answering to the Vongola. They remain outside the direct control of the Vongola and have very little power during times of peace. But, should a crisis or emergency erupt, the head of CEDEF becomes second in command of the famiglia. The leader also has equal voting power on who the next boss should be, though it’s rare that they ever disagree.”

“So if Xanxus pushes the issue, it gives Iemitsu-san more power. But they both already agreed on Tsuna-kun. Wouldn’t Xanxus kicking up a fuss just potentially end up with him being iced again?”

“I have no idea. I think Nono was quite regretful that he had to do it in the first place, but at least he could do that instead of a more permanent solution. If it happens again he might well just kill him.”

At the weekend they went over to have dinner in the Sawada home and found Nana cooking enough food for an army. After an exchange of looks they took seats. She was singing to herself the entire time, had stars in her eyes and bore a goofy smile, and kept loading more dishes onto the table, making space for actually eating a bit difficult. That did not stop them from tucking in.

Tsuna called from the hallway, “Is dinner ready yet?” He rounded the door frame and stopped in surprise. “Oh.”

The others of the household crowded in behind him with equally surprised looks. “Tsuna, what’s going on?” Bianchi asked as she took a seat.

“Did you get a one hundred on a test?” Fūta asked.

“Kaa-san?” When she failed to snap out of her dream world Tsuna tried again, more loudly.

Nana jerked, then turned and waved with the knife in her hand. “Oh, Tsu~kun!”

“Careful with the knife!” he said, hands coming up defensively. “What’s wrong? You’re acting strange.”

“Oh my, is that so? Oh yes, I haven’t told you yet. Daddy’s coming back after being away for years!” Her smile could light up the darkness, though the way that knife kept moving around, it
might bring it on.

He sighed and ate a little more. He did not want to be in the house for that meeting, though it might be wise to be present.

“Is that something to be surprised about?” Bianchi asked, eyeing Tsuna curiously.

“He’s finally been found!?” Tsuna asked his mother.

“Found…? What are you talking about?” At least the knife had been set down, so when she turned that time she wasn’t waving it in her son’s face.

“Dad disappeared somewhere, didn’t he?”

“My goodness, Tsu-kun! Who do think earns all the funding for your school and food?” she asked reasonably.

Tsuna stuttered a bit as a look of surprised realization stole over his face. “That’s true…?”

“I’ve kept in touch with him all this time, of course,” Nana said dreamily. “Tsu-kun’s daddy is digging up oil in a foreign country. He’s a man of dirt.”

“Well, I can see why Tsuna-nii would be confused,” Fūta offered. “Since Mama doesn’t talk about Papa at all, I thought it was taboo to talk about him. I thought he was already dead.”

Tsuna blinked, then said loudly, “But—you said Dad disappeared!”

“Oh my, that? That’s because Daddy said…” A finger came up to press against her lower lip as her eyes went hazy in remembrance. “Before he left he said, ‘I’m going, Nana. You like men who are romantic, right?’ And I agreed. Then he said, ‘Then tell Tsu-kun that I disappeared and became a star in the sky or something. That way, it sounds more romantic.’ Like that!”

Tsuna’s face fell.

“Papa is a funny person,” Bianchi commented.

Fūta asked, “When is he coming back?”

“Soon,” Nana chirped. “A post card came!” She fished it out of her apron and handed it to Tsuna, who examined it with a confused look on his face.

Hisui could see that it was a picture of penguins in the Antarctic. ‘Way to go, Iemitsu-san. Keep on building that trust with your future boss.’

Later that night, at home, Renato looked at him and sighed. “I’m going to hope that he’s visiting just because. I also wonder if Nono told him off.”

He shrugged. “We can hope, on both counts, but let’s not assume so.”

The next day they slipped on their earpieces tied to Tsuna and lazed around the house. Hisui was deep into a new novel when he heard an explosion. The book was snapped shut and tossed onto the table. Renato dashed into the room—he had been maintaining his gun collection—and offered an arm. Hisui took it and apparated them to the blind spot he had long ago warded.

When they arrived at the shopping district it was to see Tsuna sprawled on the ground with a boy on top of him; but that boy had blue Dying Will Flames ignited on his forehead.
“Oh,” Renato said. “That looks like Basil. This is bad.”

“I knew I should have asked more questions last night,” he muttered.

Before much of anything could be said amongst those clustered around the collision he heard, “Voooi!”

He looked over and up toward the sound and saw a man there, with long silver-white hair and wearing some kind of uniform. A sword was strapped to his left arm.

“What’s this? Outsiders parading around?” the man called down. “I’ll slice up any trash who gets in the way!”

Renato groaned softly. “That’s just brilliant. He’s Superbi Squalo, one of the Varia. We can now assume the succession is in doubt.”

“Great.”

“What’s going on?” Tsuna asked. “He looks like serious trouble.”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought, then nimbly skipped over to Kyoko. “Please get the children away from here. Now.”

She blinked stupidly at him for a moment, then nodded and grabbed for Lambo and I-Pin. She called to Futaba and started off, casting glances back over her shoulder.

“My apologies, Sawada-dono,” Basil said. “I’ve been followed.”

“Eh…”

“I have just met thee, yet I’ve already dragged thee into such a dangerous situation.”

“Eh…” Tsuna repeated. Hisui counted it as a plus that the boy was not freaking out yet. “Ano… Who are you?”

Basil did not answer; instead he jumped up, grabbed Tsuna’s hand, and dragged him off. Hayato and Takeshi gawked.

“Hey!” Tsuna cried. “What is it!?”

“Let us find a safe place!” Basil urged, hauling Tsuna around a corner. “I would like to tell thee something!”

“Voooi!” Squalo dropped down near the two. “Let’s quit this game of tag.” He stood up from his landing crouch and stared for a moment. “And, who are these guys?”

Basil’s expression went rueful.

“Let’s get you to spill everything now, shall we?” Squalo attacked and Basil parried.

“He uses a boomerang?” he whispered to Renato in disbelief. The more he watched, though, the more he realized it was more than that, but could be used as one.

Squalo sent the teen flying backward to crash into a wall “Voi!”

Tsuna’s head snapped around from the impact to Squalo.
“Yeah, you. What’s your relationship with this kid?” Squalo asked, sword pointed forward. “If you don’t spit it out, I’ll slice you.”

Tsuna started stuttering, but was interrupted when Hayato finally acted and flung dynamite out. Squalo was not a member of the Varia for nothing, and easily evaded by wall jumping out of range and landing a distance away.

Hayato had more dynamite ready and Takeshi had his sword resting against his shoulder. “Lay a hand on that person,” Hayato said, “and I won’t let you go free.”

“Yeah,” Takeshi said, “something like that. I’ll be your opponent.” Then he laughed. “Somehow my bat was handy even though I hadn’t brought it along.”

“Something we need to discuss, it seems,” he whispered.

“Good thing I keep spares,” Renato whispered back.

“You guys are also related in some way, huh? I don’t get it, but I’ll tell you something I know for sure. If you go against me, you’ll die.”

“Right back at you,” Hayato replied.

“That’s a sword he has, right? I’ll go.”

“What are the odds that Tsuna left the gloves at home?” Renato asked.

“Extremely. Be right back.” He sped off and located them carelessly stashed on a shelf in Tsuna’s room, and was back before a minute had passed. Renato took them.

“Please don’t!” Basil cried, having finally worked his way free of the wall. “He isn’t a man thou can win against!”

“It’s too late to regret,” Squalo said gleefully, and charged.

“Let’s go!” Takeshi responded, and started his own charge.

It was a decidedly one-sided fight. Squalo revealed that his sword was more of a type of gun-blade. Next he humiliated Hayato by slicing the tops off all the dynamite he was holding, then kicked him into a wall. “Voi… These guys aren’t even worth talking about. Just die!”

Basil blocked the blow meant to kill Hayato.

“You piece of trash. You plan to spill now?”

“I refuse!”

“Then this will be your grave.”

Tsuna went into panic mode at having two friends down and a seemingly friendly stranger in a fight for his life. Renato sighed and slipped over to Tsuna long enough to shove the gloves at him. “It doesn’t matter what you’re doing or where you go, you should always have these on you. Kitten, you’ve had how many assassins come after you already? Be prepared!” When Tsuna tried to waste time with useless questions he added, “Hey! Battle going on here! Pay attention!”

Tsuna looked back to see Basil in dire straits and slipped the gloves on as Renato zipped back over to where Hisui was standing, reasonably out of the danger zone. Basil hit the stone pavers with a
grunt of pain and a splash of blood.

“Voi! Did you really think you could beat me?”

Renato took aim and fired.

“You stray dog. I’ll just ask the other kid for answers. You can die!”

Tsuna caught the “hilt” of the blade as it came down to end Basil’s life. “Long hair, I’ll beat you with my Dying Will!”

Squalo blinked, his upper lip curling back at one side in confusion. “Eh?” He looked Tsuna over, from head to hands. “Don’t tell me you’re the one in Japan I heard… I see… To get in contact with you…” A psychotic grin appeared. “Now I need to ask what you’re planning even more! I’ll have you spit it out even if you die, damn it!”

“Mio Dio,” Renato said thirty seconds later. “I knew it wouldn’t be enough, but…”

It did give Basil time to recover enough to intervene again, and use his boomerang to great effect. During the distraction he was able to haul Tsuna off again and offer him a box. Hisui looked at his lover questioningly.

“The half rings. It’s come down to a decision battle between the kitten and Xanxus, then. But why? They already agreed on Tsuna.”

Dino breezed by, giving them a little wave and a smile, then put his “hard ass” face on and prepared his whip. Romario and the other guardians had his back. “Isn’t it embarrassing being so rough on kids?” he asked Squalo, who had just threatened to kill all of them. “If you don’t stop this distasteful game of yours, then I’ll be your opponent.”

Squalo paused before answering. “Voi, Bucking Horse. I have no problem with killing you right here. But if I fight people from allied families, the higher-ups will be nagging me. For today I’ll—” He dashed toward Tsuna in a flash and wrested the box from his hands. “—not go home empty-handed!”

Before Dino could respond Squalo used the explosive capabilities of his sword to create a smokescreen. By the time it cleared enough he was some distance away, but Tsuna and Basil were fine, relatively speaking.

“For your sake,” Squalo said, from some distance away, “I’ll leave their lives in your hands. But I’ll take this.” He held up the box and grinned like a shark, then leaped away, quickly leaving their sight.

He went to Tsuna and Basil as Renato checked on Hayato and Takeshi. Ivan, Brizio, and Michael went with him to help check the two over, while the others stayed with Dino.

“Why did you only appear again just now!?” Tsuna demanded. “Why didn’t you help me!”

“Always with the yelling,” he said with a exasperated shake of his head. “We’re not allowed to attack him. He’s a member of the Vongola.”

“Eh? Say what!? I was nearly killed by someone from the Vongola!? What is going on!?”

He shrugged. The middle of the shopping district was not the place to discuss any of it.

“Capo,” Romario said, “the cops.”
Indeed, he could hear the sounds of one of their cars.

“Tsuna, we’ll talk about this later,” Dino said, helping Basil to his feet. “I’ve prepared an unused hospital. Let’s go.”

Hayato and Takeshi ran up, with Renato and the guardians trailing behind them. “Are you okay?” Takeshi asked Tsuna.

“What was up with that guy?” Hayato complained.

Renato sighed and rolled his eyes slightly. “You two can go home now.”

Hayato and Takeshi looked at him in confusion.

“The level you’re fighting at right now will be nothing but a bother,” Renato said flatly, then grabbed Tsuna by the hand and dragged him away. Dino and his men quickly followed with Basil, but diverted Renato before they got too far, off to whatever hospital he had in mind.

Hisui cast a look at the boys and went to catch up. True, they had not expected any of them to do well when being faced unexpectedly by a member of the Varia, but after their defeat and being called on their performance—the fact that they looked pissed off meant one of two things. They were angry at Renato for being brutal, or angry at themselves for being beaten so quickly. Or both.

“How’s Basil doing, Romario?” Dino asked.

The hospital Dino had led them to was ghostly inside with the lack of people or sound or movement, but someone in one of the two famiglie had brought parts of the place back to working order.

“His life’s not in danger,” Romario replied. “Looks like he’s been trained well. His wounds are not severe, capo.”

“Ano… Who … is he?” Tsuna said uncertainly. “Is he a member of the Vongola, too?”

“No,” Dino said, “well, sort of, but not really. It’s … complicated. But I can tell you for sure that he’s on your side.”

“What’s going on?” Tsuna whined. “Vongola is the enemy and… I mean, I don’t need enemies or allies.”

“Tsuna, you can’t say that anymore,” Dino said seriously.

“The rings are on the move,” Renato said.

“Rings? This boy said something about that, too. The long-haired guy stole them.”

“The proper name is the Vongola Half-Rings. It’s a treasure of the Vongola Famiglia that was supposed to be left in storage for another three years.”

“Are they really pricey or something?” Tsuna asked.

“Yes, so valuable that you cannot put a price tag to them. But in the long history of the Vongola, it’s not known how much blood has been shed for these rings.”

Tsuna freaked for a moment, then heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness that long-haired guy
took the box, then.”

Dino chuckled and reached into his jacket. He brought out a box and showed it to Tsuna. “But I have it right here. These are the real ones.”

Hisui rolled his eyes. “Iemitsu-san brainwashed the kid, didn’t he?” he whispered to Renato.

“More than likely, yes. He’s only a few months older than Tsuna, so he was probably recruited into CEDEF early to be as good as he is now. Iemitsu probably taught him Japanese and thought it’d be funny to use an archaic form.”

“I really dread him showing up.”

“I know, tesoro.”

“Stop!” Tsuna shrieked. “I have to go home and study for my classes! I’d better work hard!” He turned and fled.

“Does he honestly think it’s that easy?” Renato said. “Basil was a decoy, yes?”

“Yeah,” Dino said with a sigh. “Basil himself probably wasn’t told, just to maintain realism.”

“Iemitsu probably figured something like this would happen, but I’d like to think it was a hard decision for him.”

Dino shrugged. “He should have just given these to Tsuna directly. He came to Japan with me, you know?”

“We should go,” he said. “If he’s here…”

“Don’t worry,” Dino said and smiled at them. “We’ll make sure Basil recovers!”

“Dino,” he said, including Romario in his look, “thank you.”

They caught up to Tsuna and shadowed him home. Squalo had probably set off on a journey back to Italy, to Varia Headquarters, so Tsuna ought to be safe for the time being. But they had no intention of being careless.

The boy in question was in for a surprise. When they arrived at the Sawada house Tsuna veered to walk through the gate and stopped dead. There were multiple drying racks out in the side yard, from which hung shirts, trousers, jumpsuits, wife-beaters—and several baskets of laundry yet to be hung were scattered around. On the porch was a set of tall, muddy boots.

Tsuna freaked. Inside the front door was a hard hat on the console table and a pickaxe leaned up against it. Bianchi was just coming down the stairs. “Oh, Tsuna, you’re fine? Papa is back. Mama went out to buy food because Papa quickly devoured the food she’d already made, enough for twenty people.”

Fūta came dashing in. “Tsuna-nii, you’re fine!?” He stopped, cheeks flushed red and eyes hazy. “I are sooooo worrieded.”

Lambo staggered into the hall, swaying. “There are four Tsuna-kuns,” he slurred and giggled madly.

“You two reek of alcohol!” Tsuna shrieked and snatched the bottle out of Fūta’s hand. “What are you holding!? This is sake!”
Fūta hiccuped and smiled lazily. “Papa said it was magic water.”

Tsuna caught sight of I-Pin wobbling down the hall and shrieked again, then dashed into the living room. Iemitsu was sprawled on his back, wearing only boxers and a wife-beater, fast asleep, and snoring. Several empty sake bottles were off to the side, multiple empty cans of beer, and many empty plates and platters. To properly finish off the scene, Iemitsu rolled to one side and broke wind, then mumbled happily, “Nana.”

Tsuna fled upstairs.

Renato snorted and eyed Iemitsu with something akin to disgust.

“Now I know where the kitten’s odd choices in boxers come from,” he whispered to his lover, then turned away to capture Lambo and haul him up. He shook his head at seeing inebriated children and cursed how unbelievably irresponsible Tsuna’s father was with them. “What am I going to do with you?” he muttered, gazing at the cloudy green eyes of his little student.

Lambo giggled at him as his head lolled to the side. “Nagi-san loves Lambo-san!”

‘Gods help me, but I kind of do. And since when did I gain a nickname?’ “We need to get you to sleep this off, chibi.”

“Lambo-san feels warm and fuzzy. And dizzy.” He giggled again.

He sighed and crouched back down to grab I-Pin, then headed upstairs to Tsuna’s room, tapping the door with his foot until the boy opened it. “Where do these two normally bed down? They really need to sleep this off. And Fūta-kun, too, but we can get him in a minute.”

A minute later he was tucking Lambo into a bed, staring at the child a bit sadly. Hopefully he would wake up fine. Children were generally resilient, though this should never have happened in the first place. He felt Renato look in briefly. Once he was done he sought out Tsuna again. “Do me a favor, kitten.”

“Hm?”

“If you notice your father giving the kids alcohol again, let me know?”

Tsuna nodded, a frown marring his brow.

Renato was on duty the next morning, and it was a normal enough situation right up until the point when Hisui realized that Lambo had not shown up for a lesson. Of course, the kid had gone to bed blitzed out of his mind, so perhaps he had just slept more heavily and longer than normal. Or, perhaps, he was interested in a new face at the house. Missing a lesson wasn’t the end of the world, but if it started to become a habit he would have to have a little talk with the cow.

He turned on his earpiece and listened in for the day, splitting his attention between that and a book. Tsuna flipped out when he realized what the rings meant and he was worried that they would have to explain about the most recent assassination attempt. Tsuna was back to denying his heritage, even though Hayato and Takeshi were thrilled to take part (though it took Tsuna trying to use the ‘long-haired man’ as a reason not to be involved for Takeshi to do a one-eighty from his initial thought to refuse).

Ryohei fell into place, excited beyond reason at the idea that Master Paopao would be teaching him, then switched his attention when Colonnello arrived to take him in hand. Dino went after Hibari. Hisui got the feeling Hayato would try for Shamal, but who knew how that would turn out. He felt a
mild sense of regret that they had not gotten around to deviously leading Hayato to the realization that his life mattered too. Takeshi would most likely seek out his father for training.

That left Mist and Lightning, and he was already fairly certain who Lightning was.

Then came the sound of a gun being fired. School was definitely off the table. “Couldn’t all this have waited until their break?” he muttered. “You’re an asshole, Xanxus. Fuck this.” He set down his book and headed to the Sawada house.

Nana let him in, stars in her eyes and a dreamy smile on her lips. He held back a sigh as he stepped inside and glanced around. “Nana-chan, where is Lambo-kun?”

A finger came up to press against her lower lip as she thought. “I’m not sure!” she said brightly.

“I see. Well, don’t let me interrupt. I’m going to take Lambo-kun for a while, all right?”

She nodded and skipped off to the kitchen, presumably to cook yet more food, or possibly to do more laundry. How in hell Iemitsu had managed to bring home an entire wardrobe’s worth of clothing for his wife to clean…

As soon as she was out of hearing range he gave in to the urge to sigh, then poked his head into the living room. Lambo was sprawled on the floor near yet another empty sake bottle. He went over and hefted the child up, and was disgusted to realize the chibi reeked of alcohol. ‘I must not kill allies,’ he thought, then exited the house and took the boy home with him.

He deposited the child on the loveseat and laid a light blanket over him, then resumed reading his book after getting himself a soda. He burned through several cigarettes before the little cow woke up and gazed at him blearily.

“Nagi-san?”

“Yes. I take it that Papa gave you more magic water?”

Lambo nodded slowly. “He was playing with Lambo-san, tossing him up in the air, but he missed, so he gave Lambo-san magic water for the ouchies.”

He sighed. “And you fell asleep, which is why you missed your lesson.”

Lambo’s eyes went all teary. He sat up and sniffled. “Lambo-san is sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, chibi, but I appreciate that you’re willing to apologize. Let’s get something straight, though. No more magic water.”

Lambo blinked at him. “Why?”

“Magic water is alcohol. It’s an adult beverage. You are much too young to be drinking like that, and I really don’t want to see just how much lasting harm it may cause you.” He waited, and when all Lambo did was nod again he said, “Verbally, please.”

“…Lambo-san won’t drink any more magic water.”

He nodded. “Did you even eat breakfast?”

Lambo’s eyes cut to the side and his brow furrowed. “Lambo-san doesn’t remember.”

‘Kami-sama. This is obviously a trial from the gods as a test of my patience, to see if I can manage
not to use Iemitsu as an acupuncture dummy.’ “Are you hungry?”

“…A little.”

He closed his book and set it aside, then got up and picked Lambo up. “Let’s have a snack, then.” He brought the chibi into the kitchen, parked him on a boosted seat, and put some grapes in a bowl for him. For himself he quickly peeled an apple and cored it, cut it into slices, and tossed those in a bowl. While they were eating he asked, “Did Papa give you anything? Aside from magic water, that is.”

Lambo nodded vigorously and finished his current grape before saying, “Lambo-san was given a pretty ring! Papa said Lambo-san could earn the other half.”

His eyes closed briefly. ‘There are days when I truly loathe you, Iemitsu-san.’ Regret, grief, fear, anger—he was not happy. “It’s possible you could die,” he said bluntly.

Lambo laughed.

If Iemitsu had made Lambo the Lightning Guardian it was entirely likely that his idea of strategy was for Lambo to use the Ten Year Bazooka. “If you really mean to do it, you need to start training.”

“Lambo-san is a skilled hitman!”

He nodded. “I see. I need some idea of your skill level. How many people have you killed so far?” Lambo became very interested in his snack, pretending to have trouble choosing which grape to eat next.

“Uh huh. How many jobs have you been sent on?”

“Oh look! Lambo-san has found a perfect grape!” The boy plucked one out and stuffed it in his mouth, then chewed slooooowly.

He stifled the urge to chuckle at the obvious delaying tactic and mentally praised his student for using one of the rules to his advantage. “Pretending you don’t hear me is amusing, but ultimately pointless, chibi.”

Lambo’s brow furrowed in consternation.

“You are very clever and very smart. But you are also very inexperienced. I told you quite a ways back that I would help if you asked. So?”

“…Nagi-san will help Lambo-san?”

His brow went up. “I already answered that. Perhaps you should rephrase the question.”

Lambo frowned cutely. “Will Nagi-san help Lambo-san?”

He smiled faintly and nodded. “Yes. Finish up those grapes and we’ll do some stamina work.” The odds of the child actually winning were negligible, but he agreed with his assumption of Iemitsu’s plan; Lambo would get upset at the first “ouchie”, cry, and use the Ten Year Bazooka. Fifteen year old Lambo was not necessarily a vast improvement, but he would still be an improvement. And if he got flustered enough?

Lambo beamed at him and fished out another grape to eat.
‘I can’t push him very far because one, he’s practically a baby, and two, he’s probably still metabolizing off the effects of the booze. But, I can get him jogging, zap him repeatedly with low levels of electricity, and—I wonder if there’d be any point in teaching him hand-to-hand? Long term, anyway. Though I’m having trouble seeing him in a dojo, not with his tendency to flip out and fling grenades like they were candy. On the other hand, if I lay down rules for that, he might actually listen to me and behave.’

Once the boy was finished with his snack he hustled him out back and into the training area he normally brought Tsuna to, making sure he had plenty of sports drinks and water. ‘Two things, chibi. First, you’re going to be jogging. The better your stamina, the longer you can fight, and the better you’ll be able to use your flames once we get those ignited. Second, I’m going to be hitting you with some electricity to get you used to it. You’re a Lightning, so you should be able to learn how to absorb it.’

“Eh?”

“One of the times we saw your fifteen year old self he used lightning to power his horns. That meant getting hit with a bolt of lightning. It did him no harm, but I figure he had to work his way up to that. So, the younger you start, the sooner you can get on with that. All right?”

“O~kay!”

“Good. Start jogging around the track, then. A steady pace, if you please. Don’t sprint.”

Lambo gave him a confused look, but complied.

“Now, be prepared for the electricity, chibi. I won’t use too much at first.” And he did, sending magical shocks at the child. Lambo squealed each time, but did not seem to be in any real pain. He kept it up for fifteen minutes before calling for a break and handing Lambo a small sports drink.

“Think you can go another round?” he asked once it was consumed. Young children were generally bundles of energy, but frequently only for a given thing for a short time.

Lambo looked more than a little done in, but he nodded.

“All right. One more round of this, then we’ll cool you down and move onto the next thing.”

That evening Renato breezed in after escorting Tsuna home. “Haru showed up at the mountain. How she managed to find us is beyond me, but she ended up at the cliff. Brought the kitten something to eat.”

“At least she’s a bit more practical than most fangirls,” he commented.

“Hayato was also on the mountain. Unfortunately, he was alone up there, which means his bid to get Shamal’s help failed.”

He groaned softly. “I suppose I could—”

“No,” Renato interrupted. “The kitten took off as soon as Haru mentioned he was on the mountain, as well, worried about his friend. Hayato wasn’t doing so well and was pretty beat up. Shamal was there, though, watching. But so was Iemitsu, and he was the one to finally clue Hayato in to where he was going wrong, how he wasn’t valuing his own life. Shamal stepped in at that point to reinstate himself as the brat’s tutor.”

He furrowed his brow. “And the reason I haven’t seen Iemitsu-san is because he’s probably been flitting around between guardians. He wouldn’t have any reason to bother looking in on Lambo
because of his expectations."

"I assume you’ve been working with the cow today, then?"

He nodded. "Once he sobered up, yes. Not much, but he’s so young, and we all know he’ll use the bazooka. And yes, I’ve been hitting him with increasing amounts of electricity. He’s a stubborn little thing. Said he wanted to do the fight."

Renato scoffed. "Yeah, Iemitsu was free with the sake again this morning. The kitten wanted me to make sure you knew that. Oh, I’ll get Shamal to write up some excuses for the kids and turn them into the school. They all came down with chicken pox or something. They won’t care about Hibari. He’s practically a law unto himself."

"You going to push the kitten to learn Zero Point Breakthrough?"

"Of course. Dino let me know that Basil is back up and about, between a visit from Iemitsu and help from Romario, so he can act as a sparring partner. The kid can fight mostly defensively for that, and be a living example of part of what the kitten needs to learn. With as much as you’ve been running the kitten into the ground, he shouldn’t need a Dying Will Bullet. Damn stubbornness is driving me a bit mad."

Renato’s birthday passed with little fanfare, though Hisui made dinner specifically to his tastes that evening, and spoiled the hell out of him in bed. Tsuna was not let off early the day following for his own. Nana would be making yet another feast anyway, they presumed, though it would be more geared toward Iemitsu than her child.

"I gave him our gift before he went inside," Renato said.

It was getting on toward dinner on Friday when unease crawled up his spine and put him on alert. They were supposed to have it at the Sawada house and he had already set out to go there, but he was not about to ignore his intuition. Thus he concentrated, trying to figure out who was triggering it. It wasn’t Nana, or Renato, or Tsuna—Lambo? "Shit, I really have fallen for the little cow."

He snapped off a locater and set out, slipping the earpiece tied to Renato into place and tapping it. When he did not receive a response he pulled his phone out to send a text, but that was when Renato responded.

"Lambo’s in danger."

"Yeah, I’m trying to find him now."

"Heading?"

"East-northeast. I think he’s somewhere between the shopping district and Nana-chan’s."

"The Varia is here."

"Shit. Which means we can’t fight directly."

"Yes, but Iemitsu went off to check on and warn the other guardians. But if necessary we’ll just have to shoot the kitten."

He heard a squawk in the background, but by then he had found the cow. He was with Fūta and I-Pin, and they were running from a sword-wielding adult. Hisui might not be able to fight directly, but he could delay, and do it subtly, from the shadows. To that end he slowed down the pursuer. "Found
him,” he sent in a whisper. “The kids are on twelfth right now.”

“Almost there.”

“Stay away!” Fūta cried, still dragging the little ones with him.

Renato and Tsuna came barreling around the corner, but before either of them could react Ryohei barged in from the other end of the street and punched the aggressor so hard he went flying. His hand was aflame.

“Vongola Famiglia’s Guardian of the Sun and Colonnello’s best disciple, Sasagawa Ryohei, is here!”

He rolled his eyes at the needless introduction. After all, the guy Ryohei hit seemed to be unconscious.

Tsuna went to run forward, but Renato held him back. “Not yet.”

A second man jumped in from the top of the street’s east-side retaining wall and was promptly knocked out of the park. A third also tried and was blown into unconsciousness by Hayato. Lambo, Fūta, and I-Pin raced for the three and crowded in close.

“Geez, why does the dumb cow have a ring?” Hayato complained.

Renato removed his restraining hand from Tsuna and let the kitten run to join his friends. Hisui ghosted over and said quietly, “We’re not done yet.”

“They’re much weaker than I thought they’d be,” Ryohei commented while Tsuna was busy trying to appease a tired and hungry Lambo. “That was an easy victory!”

“You’re thinking too simplistically,” Renato said. “Those three are just underlings of the Varia. The really scary ones—” He broke off and looked toward the retaining wall that separated a park from the street. “He’s here.”

Hisui followed his gaze to see a tall man in a Varia uniform. On his back was a strange harness with eight hilts of some kind sticking out, four to a side. He had spiky dark hair and odd facial hair.

“So, you guys did that.”


“My opponent who wields the Lightning Ring is the funny little cow kid,” Levi said menacingly, glaring at the child.

Lambo gulped, then noticed that Hisui was there, and scrambled away from the guardians to cling to him instead.

Levi reached back for the uppermost hilts on his back and started to pull them free.

“Hold it, Levi!” Four others appeared on the retaining wall, though one of them looked more like a machine, and one was Arcobaleno Mammon. Judging by the hair, one was Lussuria. The other was Belphegor based on the tiara in his blond hair. “Don’t hunt them all on your own,” Lussuria added.

“It looks like there are other wielders of rings here, as well,” Mammon remarked.

And then, of course, came a familiar, “Voooiii! How dare you trick me, you piece of trash! Which
one of you wields the Ring of Rain?”

“Me,” Takeshi said with a dark expression.

“Oh, it’s you.” Squalo grinned sharply. “Three seconds. I’ll slice you up in three seconds.”

There was some jostling happening up there, and another figure appeared.

“Xanxus,” Renato whispered.

The killing intent in the air froze Tsuna and his guardians in place, though Tsuna somehow ended up on his ass. “Sawada Tsunayoshi,” Xanxus growled. He brought his hand up; it ignited with a dark flame.

“No way, boss,” Lussuria cried. “You’re suddenly using that!?”

“Are you planning to kill us, too?” Squalo asked, hunching away a bit.

“This is bad,” Renato called to the guardians. “Run!”

“Die!” Xanxus snarled.

“Hold it, Xanxus!” Iemitsu called out. He appeared on the next section over, with Basil and another man at his side. “That’s enough. From here on, I’ll take charge of things.”

“Dad?” Tsuna said weakly.

“Iemitsu!”

“Y-you—what are you doing here?” Squalo demanded, his sword arm coming up.

“Xanxus... Is one of your minions planning to lift up a sword against me, the external advisor?”

“Don’t stick your comments in now, Iemitsu!” Squalo said with loathing. “You’re the wuss who can do nothing but run around.”

“What!?”

“Wait, Basil,” Iemitsu said firmly, causing Basil to back down and lower his weapon. “I wasn’t running. I was just waiting for an answer from Nono. I was questioning the way you guys have been doing your stuff lately, along with Nono’s approval. So I sent messages to Nono with some significant questions. And, an order that I assume is his reply has just arrived.”

“I don’t get what’s going on!” Tsuna whined. “Besides, why Dad—!?”

Renato sighed. “He’s the external advisor to the Vongola Famiglia. He both is, and is not, Vongola. He’s not involved during peaceful times, but when the famiglia is in a crisis he becomes second in command to Nono. I’ll explain more later. Now isn’t the time. Right now you have one half of the rings; the Varia has the other half. The side that fully claims them has proof of the claim to be heir. It’s rare that the boss and the external advisor choose different candidates.”

Basil had jumped down and just then arrived in front of Tsuna. He offered up a scroll as Iemitsu made sure one got to Xanxus. “Sawada-dono, these are direct orders from the Vongola Nono.”

Tsuna took the scroll and undid the tie, then pulled it open. It was sealed at the top with Sky Flame. The same was true of the one Xanxus held.
“That’s Nono’s stamp of Dying Will Flame,” Mammon said. “There’s no mistake. It’s a real order.”

“That’s Nono’s stamp of Dying Will Flame,” Mammon said. “There’s no mistake. It’s a real order.”

“Ano… It’s written in Italian,” Tsuna observed. “I can’t read it! We didn’t get that far yet.”

“Iemitsu barked out a laugh. “Translated, this is what it basically says: Until now I thought that the one worthy to become heir was Iemitsu’s son, Sawada Tsunayoshi, and so I decided that way. However, lately, because I am nearing the end of my life, my intuition has sharpened, and I’ve decided to select a more worthy heir. My son, Xanxus, is the one worthy to become the Vongola Decimo. But, there will be people unsatisfied with this change. Currently, Iemitsu has refused to give Xanxus his half of the rings.”

Tsuna’s brain started melting if his expression said anything. He looked at his father with confused despair.

“However, I have no intent for members of my own famiglia to indulge in useless battles. Therefore, let us start the traditional Vongola battle that everyone might be satisfied. So, what this means is, those who wield the same type of ring will fight each other in a one-on-one battle.”

Iemitsu smiled broadly, plasticly. “So, you can all go back to wherever you’re staying for the moment while this gets set up. You’ll be informed soon enough of the arrangements. Further instructions will be forthcoming.”

Hisui was about to gather up the children and go when two women appeared. They looked like twins and had darkly-tanned skin, long pink hair, and black half masks with white screens over the eyes.

“Thank you for waiting,” one of them said. “In this scramble for the rings, we’ll serve as judges. We are the Cervello Organization, serving directly under the Vongola Nono.” She held up another flame-stamped parchment. “Please consider our decisions regarding the scramble battle for the rings as Nono’s decision. Nono said that this is the most risky step to satisfy the entire famiglia. Do you have any objections? Xanxus-sama?”

When he said nothing she continued, “Thank you very much.”


The second girl replied, “We cannot accept your objection. We serve the ninth directly, and thus you have no authority over us.”

“What…”

“Oh my,” Lussuria chirped, “too bad…”

“So, the ninth has chosen Xanxus-sama, and Iemitsu-san has chosen Tsunayoshi-san. In this battle, the ones who are truly worthy to wield the rings will prove so with their lives. The location is Namimori Middle at midnight. Further details will be revealed later. We shall await you all at eleven o’clock tomorrow at the school.”

“Good-bye.”

The two women leaped away, out of sight.

Hisui plucked Lambo off his leg and settled him in his arms, then went over to collect I-Pin. “Come along, Fūta-kun,” he said, and waited for the boy to start moving before walking with him toward the
Sawada home. “You all right, chibi?” he asked along the way.

“Lambo-san is fine,” Lambo insisted.

“Do you understand now why I was worried about you agreeing to this fight?”

“Ano… Lambo-san will be fine!”

He rolled his eyes slightly. “If you die, I will never forgive you,” he threatened. “Fūta-kun? I-Pin-chan? Are you two unharmed?”

Fūta looked up at him and smiled. “We’re fine, Nagi-san,” he said, and I-Pin nodded.

‘Great, now it’s not just Lambo-kun using that name.’

When they got to the Sawada home Fūta opened the door and held it for them. Hisui set his two burdens down before removing his shoes and tucking them into one of the cubbies, then wandered into the kitchen. Nana had cooked enough for an army again.

Dinner itself was fairly quiet. There was too much that could be said that should never be spoken of in front of Nana, so options for small talk were quickly exhausted. He tucked Lambo in for the night before he left, then went home with Renato.

“So, I have to assume our kitten has flipped into denial again.”

“I expect so. I’ll be over there bright and early, just in case,” Renato replied wearily. “Why the hell couldn’t he have stayed on ice? I’ll just have to push that much harder for Tsuna to learn that technique. I don’t see what else would help. At least the others take pride in their abilities.”

“They only need to win four,” he reminded his lover. “Has Iemitsu-san said anything about the Mist Guardian?”

Renato shook his head. “He’s being a tight-lipped bastard on that one. But, hey, you know, we’re only responsible for Tsuna, so it’s not like we need to know anything.”

“Look on the bright side,” he said flatly. “If they fail, Xanxus will more than likely kill them all, and we can run away to go live in shame on a deserted island.”

His lover snorted in amusement. “Right.”

He got a text the next morning while he was waiting for Lambo to arrive. Tsuna had indeed flipped into denial. Renato told him to go to school then if he didn’t care about how all of them were going to end up dead, and seemingly walked away.

In the middle of supervising Lambo during his morning exercises he got another text, this time to let him know just how amused Renato was at Tsuna’s reaction to Kyoko revealing that not only was Colonnello staying at their house, but that they cooked together, played together, and even bathed together. And apparently, the boys were involved in a sumo wrestling competition. Kyoko accepted it without a second thought.

That evening they went to the Sawada home after dinner. Hisui did something he was not happy about and compelled Nana to retire early to her room and read before bed, and to not pay attention when they would inevitably all end up leaving the house.

Tsuna was unhappy, too. “Hey… Are we really going to take Lambo-kun?”
“Of course,” he said. “He’s one of your guardians.”

“Lambo-san will go!” Lambo said firmly.

“He has no idea,” Tsuna muttered.

‘Joke’s on you, kitten,’ he thought. ‘Lambo may not be ready, but he does have a clue.’

“And how was school?” Renato asked Tsuna. “Did you calm down after seeing your famiglia?”

Tsuna scowled. “No way! They aren’t my famiglia! I’m not satisfied one bit! Why do I have to be involved in all of this? There are others much stronger than me.”

He watched as Renato tried valiantly not to roll his eyes in exasperation. “Don’t misunderstand the situation, kitten. Iemitsu didn’t give you the rings just to prevent Xanxus from becoming the heir. He gave them to you because he thinks you’re worthy of being the successor. Stop living in a dream world. I’ve already told you you’re likely to end up dead if you don’t take this seriously. If you fail, even if you don’t die in the process, Xanxus will have you and your men killed because you’re a threat. Denial is just a way of you saying you’re ready to lie down and die, and to take your friends with you. Is that really the kind of person you want to be?”

“Come on,” he said, picking up Lambo, “it’s time we got going.”

The walk to the school was quiet, but when they arrived Tsuna dashed on ahead when he saw his friends. “Sorry for being late.”

They weren’t.

“But then,” Takeshi said, “there are those who aren’t even here yet.”

“The Mist guy hasn’t shown up,” Ryohei added.

“It’s so quiet,” Tsuna said, looking around warily. “Are they not here yet?”

“They’re already standing by,” came from the top of the school. Two Cervello were standing there, along with members of the Varia. “After a strict conference, the pairing for the scramble battle this night has been decided. The first match is the battle between the Sun Guardians.”

After a tiny pause the two Cervello leaped down to the ground, followed by the Varia. “Thank you for gathering,” one of the Cervello said. “Now we shall explain the scramble battle for the rings for the successor’s seat. Please look over there.” She pointed at a cage that most of them had not seemed to notice until that point, which meant it had been covered in illusion. “It’s a special arena that we’ve prepared for the match between the Sun Guardians.”

The other continued, “This time, we took the traits of the Sun Guardians into account and prepared this arena, although each match will be in different areas.”

While the others were talking out their reactions, Hisui was eyeing the child in his arms. Lambo was snoozing against his shoulder.

When the time came a Cervello said, “Well, then, Sun Guardians, please come to the center of the ring.”

Lussuria clasped his hands together happily. “Time to play~!”

While the Cervello were verifying the half rings of both Lussuria and Ryohei, Iemitsu and Basil
showed up, along with that as yet unnamed dark-haired male. Iemitsu said something Hisui did not bother to pay attention to, as Lussuria was amusing himself by flirting with Ryohei. Ryohei … simply looked confused.

“I feel like I’m watching a train wreck about to happen,” he muttered.

Renato snorted softly. “I’m sure Colonnello did a damn fine job training the kid.”

“The wielders of the Sun Rings, Lussuria versus Sasagawa Ryohei—begin!” exclaimed a Cervello. Blindingly bright lights at the top of the cage turned on. Renato immediately tipped his hat down, but Hisui simply cast a quick spell to shield his own eyes from the intensity.

“I get why the lights, to an extent,” he murmured, “but how convenient that Lussuria is wearing sunglasses.”

“I understand that they’re prescription,” Renato said as he fished a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on.

“This special ring was remodeled for the Sun Guardian battle; it’s a coliseum lit by a fake sun.”

“What!? I can’t see anything!” Tsuna complained.

Renato sighed and fished out another pair of sunglasses, then shoved them into Tsuna’s hand. Once he could see Tsuna realized that Lussuria had an advantage and started shouting about unfairness at the Cervello.

“We will not accept any contact with one of the guardians during the battle. If you should do so, we will consider it a disqualification and the ring will be forfeit to the other side.”

Lussuria continued to flirt as Ryohei struck out around himself blindly, then punched him into the ropes. Ryohei hit and sizzled, then fell back to land on the cage floor.

“The ropes are wired,” a Cervello explained, “and heated to several hundred degrees.”

Lussuria hummed happily. “You’re slowly becoming my perfect, ideal body,” he told Ryohei as he forced himself back up. “My ultimate sense of beauty for the body is a cold, deteriorating, unmoving body.”

“So, necrophiliac?”

He sighed and wished he did not have to be present. ‘Well, I don’t, I suppose, but not being here would be incredibly rude and disrespectful. I have to wonder what Primo was thinking when he thought this stuff up. Better command of your powers or tactics is one thing, but that doesn’t mean the winner shares your philosophy as to how to go on with the Vongola. On the other hand, I suppose the “you might die” part helps to motivate the participants.’

Colonnello arrived, carried by his hawk, just as Ryohei was tricked into punching Lussuria’s metal knee plate.

“It’s about time,” Renato said dryly.

“I got caught by Kyoko,” Colonnello said sourly. “Damn girl tucked me into a bed and read me a bedtime story.”

Hisui bit the inside of his mouth so as not to laugh at the imagery.
“He’s dehydrating!” Tsuna cried in alarm.

“It’s about time,” Colonnello said. “Go and show him your true strength, Ryohei!”

“No matter who talks, it’s useless,” Lussuria practically sang. “This boy is finished. I’ll have him.”

“Colonnello-shishô… I’ve been waiting for those words!”

“He’s getting up!”

“Yeah!” Hayato said.

“B-but is he all right?” Tsuna asked.

“His sweat is steaming and making sizzling sounds.” Takeshi looked disturbed by that.

Lussuria extended an arm, his hand fisted except for his pinky. “The way your body is made is different from mine. I bet you can’t last in the scorching light. Hurry up and die so you can be a part of my corpse collection.”

“I see what you mean about the sanity issues and interpersonal skills,” he commented, wrinkling his nose, then looked down at Lambo. The little cow was still sleeping, one hand firmly clutching Hisui’s shirt.

“Maximum canon!” Ryohei shouted.

He looked up in time to see the boy nail Lussuria in the face, in the process cracking one of the lenses of the man’s glasses. But Lussuria got back up and taunted Ryohei. Then the lights above shattered and rained glass shards down into the cage.

“I see. It’s because of the sweat he produced from dehydration,” Lussuria said. “The water in his sweat evaporated due to the heat and left behind salt crystals. Then he put the salt on his fist and shot it like pellets. Ooookay. But a cheap trick like this? Even I can do that.” He blurred forward and took a swipe at Ryohei. A moment later a bank of lights overhead rained down more glass.

“He grazed the salt off lawn head!?”

“No,” Renato said, “it requires more technique than that. He blew the crystals off Ryohei’s body with the power of his fist. That’s what you call Varia Quality.”

“Varia Quality?” Tsuna said, looking at Renato for an explanation.

“The Varia takes on missions that are said to be impossible for regular humans to do,” he obliged. “They are a group of genius assassins who complete their missions to perfection, regardless of the situation they’re placed in. Their so-called demonic works or their high-level skills in killing, is considered Varia Quality.”

Hisui wandered a short way away and sat down, bored. He was an assassin, not the sort to get into fist fights or wave a damn sword around. It was true that Ryohei’s life was on the line, but he simply couldn’t help but be bored. He was tempted to toss out a quick and dirty ward set and take a nap.

And then—“Kyoko-chan!? Wha—? Why is she here!?” Tsuna shrieked.

“The girls were looking for Colonnello, so I escorted them here,” Iemitsu replied, looking smug.

He yawned when Lussuria lost. Ryohei shattered the man’s knee, simply so Kyoko wouldn’t cry.
“Hey, you did well, Ryohei,” Colonnello said, and signaled to his hawk to take flight. “Well, let’s go home, Kyoko! I’m sleepy!” He flew off, Kyoko giving one last look at her brother before racing after him, Hana on her heels.

“It was a good, tense battle,” Ryohei said. “Now give me the ring.”

“No! I don’t want to!” Lussuria whined fearfully, and forced himself to an uncertain crouch. “I’m part of the Varia. I can win with only one leg! It’s easy!” He laughed nervously.


“That’s not it,” Renato replied, a second before Lussuria was shot from behind and knocked to the ground in a spray of blood.

“When you do it, you really do it, isn’t that right, Gola Mosca?” Mammon remarked.

“‘Erasing the weak.’ One of the reasons why Varia is the strongest team of all,” Renato explained calmly. “Lussuria was scared of that; that’s why he was so anxious to continue.”

Ryohei approached his fallen foe. “Hey! Wake up!”

The Cervello blocked his way. “Don’t get any closer,” one warned. “At this moment, Lussuria is unable to continue fighting. Therefore, Sasagawa Ryohei is the victor of the scramble battle for the Sun Ring. This is the end of tonight’s match. We shall now announce the next battle’s participants.”

The Cervello waited out a few comments, then one said, “Tomorrow evening’s battle will be the match between the Lightning Guardians.”

Hisui got up and walked away. When he arrived at the Sawada house he tucked a still sleeping Lambo into his bed, kissed him on the forehead, and left. He settled in with a butterbeer and a cigarette when he got home, and stared at the wall. When Renato arrived he sat next to him on the loveseat, not saying a word, and just slipped an arm around his shoulders and leaned into him.

When Lambo arrived the next morning Hisui skipped any semblance of training and instead got out the bucket of modeling clay. “Let’s make something we can put on display, chibi,” he said. “Maybe something we can hang in a window.”

“O-kay!” Lambo said cheerfully. “But what should Lambo-san make?”

“Do you have a favorite animal? You like takoyaki, so how about an octopus?”

Lambo squealed happily and nodded, then dug a hand into the clay. Hisui waited until he had enough and got some for himself. He was shit at this sort of thing, but that was not the point. He was not getting any screaming sensation of extreme danger, but that did not stop him from feeling uneasy about the entire situation. Lambo would, if nothing else, have a fun day with him. There was no particular reason to burden him with training when he was going to have to fight at midnight.

For his own creation he decided to try his hand at making a seahorse. He preferred leafy seadragons, but to make one of those in clay was to invite pieces snapping off if he breathed too hard. Besides, they had such delicate, translucent extensions, and clay was probably not the best choice for a medium.

Lambo seemed very pleased with his first attempt, but decided he could do better and dug out more clay. Hisui went ahead and transferred the first one to a tray he had lined with parchment paper and set off to the side. By the time Lambo scampered off to return to Nana’s there were six each of octopi
They arrived again at the Sawada home after dinner and went up to Tsuna’s room. Nana was under another compulsion to retire early, to Hisui’s displeasure. He supposed they could all sneak out Tsuna’s window and down the tree, but that was a little too absurd for his sense of decorum. Rain streaked that window with rivulets of water, blurring what view there was of the night sky. It made him wonder if the Cervello were just that good at weather forecasting, and if an approaching storm was the very reason they chose the Lightning Battle to be held second. The rain was even worse when they set out. Hisui used gravity to keep the rain off himself, Lambo, and Renato, but all the others were sporting umbrellas.

“I wonder if there’s some way we can withdraw,” Tsuna wondered out loud.

“Don’t worry,” Takeshi said. “If anything happens, we’ll jump in.”

“Actions such as that will result in a disqualification,” said a Cervello. Two of them had appeared up high again, wearing hooded, black raincoats. “Any who interrupt, as well as the one saved, will forfeit their rings to the opponent.”

“Damn them,” Hayato muttered. “They’ve got to be kidding.”

‘And yet having Gola Mosca target and shoot Lussuria did not immediately forfeit last night’s battle?’

“Please look over there,” one said, and both pointed. “That will be tonight’s battle field.”

“The roof!?” Tsuna cried, just as arcs of lightning came down to strike several of the rods rising up from the roof.

“Gyupaal!”
When they got up to the roof he could see what resembled a hexagonal spiderweb of cables, with odd rods at each outer point, and one at the center. Lambo’s eyes went wide on seeing it, though Hisui could not tell if the boy was awed or scared.

“Tonight’s combat arena has been fitted with lightning rods for the match between the Lightning Guardians. The battleground is called the Elettrico Circuito.”

Lightning arced down and hit one of the rods; the electricity was drawn down and into the cabling, making a bright show of it.

“The Elettrico Circuito’s floor has been coated with a special conductor. The lightning that strikes the rods will be discharged onto the floor at several times its normal potency.”

“No way!” Tsuna said in disbelief. “You’d be burnt to death from just standing there!”

“They knew that a thunderstorm was coming tonight and set this up, huh?” Hayato remarked.

Lambo hopped out of his arms and pointed. “Lambo-san wants to do that!”

“Hey, wait! Lambo-kun! It’s dangerous!” Tsuna snaked out a hand to grab at Lambo, causing one of the child’s horns to pop free and hit the rooftop. “Ah, you dropped your horn again.” He crouched down to retrieve it, but Hayato snatched it out of his hand.

“Give me that,” Hayato muttered, then pulled a marker from his back pocket and wrote something on the horn. “Now everyone will know that this belongs to you,” he said smugly, and offered it to Lambo.

Lambo gasped as he took it. A quick look showed that Hayato had defaced it with an insult.

“Lightning Guardian Lambo, please go to the center of the battleground. Your opponent has been waiting for two hours.”

Lambo was grabbed for a group cheer—Hisui rolled his eyes, but if it helped, so be it—and pulled away slightly after by Tsuna. “Lambo-kun, listen to me! If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to. I don’t know why my dad picked you, but there’s something wrong in having such a young kid fight. You don’t want to die this young, right?”

Lambo adopted a blasé look. “My, my, my. Tsuna-kun doesn’t know? Lambo-san can’t die because he’s invincible. Bye.” He started to walk away, but Tsuna grabbed him again.

“Wait. You can’t shoot the Ten Year Bazooka, okay!? The older Lambo forbade it. But if you’re still going, take these.” He offered up a different set of horns.

“Ew! Lambo-san doesn’t want those!”

“Just take them!” Tsuna insisted, and shoved them into Lambo’s hands.

“I’m going!” Lambo scampered off to the battleground and stopped at the nearest Cervello. “Hey, hey, how do you play with this?”
“Lambo-kun,” Tsuna whispered.

Hisui sat down on the short retaining wall enclosing the roof and sighed. Renato joined him a moment later and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

“The battle for the Lightning Ring, Leviathan versus Lambo—begin!”

The little cow was electrified all of ten seconds later, while he was examining the cabling and muttering to himself. He hit the floor face first.

“Lambo-kun!” Tsuna yelled.

“…We have to check to see if he’s still alive.”

Levi scoffed. “There’s no need. He’s gone.”

Lambo sat up at that point and burst into tears. “It hurts!” The spare set of horns he had been given tumbled to the ground.

“He’s okay!” Tsuna cried. “He’s alive! Wait—” He looked around quickly, spotted them, and dashed over. “How is he alive?”

“It’s a trait his skin gained after being struck by lightning multiple times when he was younger.”

“Yeah, because it’s not as if someone was trying to kill him or anything,” he muttered.

“It’s called Elettrico Cuioio, a type of skin that’s an excellent conductor of electricity. Even if he’s hit by lightning, it’ll travel along his skin and discharge into the ground, and prevent damage to the brain or internal organs, or even surface burns, for the most part. He must not only take lightning, but also the damage to the famiglia, like a lightning rod. That’s the role of the Lightning Guardian.”

Levi got over his shock, Lambo stopped crying loudly, and Levi went on the offensive. When Lambo hit the floor again, his horns falling off from the blow to join the spare set already on the roof, the crying started anew, but that time he fetched out his bazooka and fired. When the smoke cleared they could see an older Lambo, wearing a bib napkin and holding a set of hashi with a dumpling between them.

“I didn’t think dumplings were going to be my last supper,” Lambo commented.

“Voi! What the hell? There’s an outsider in there!” Squalo complained.

“No, he’s the ring holder summoned from ten years into the future by the Ten Year Bazooka. Therefore, we recognize him as the candidate and the battle may continue.”

“Lambo, I’m sorry!” Tsuna shouted. “Your child form couldn’t handle it!”

“Please don’t apologize,” Lambo said, reaching down to pick up the younger Lambo’s dropped horns. As he set them in place he continued, “I had a feeling that it was going to happen. Anyway, young Vongola, when I absolutely have to do something, I can be a man.”

“Don’t stand out more than me,” Levi complained.

“You’re Varia? That’s an impossible request. I’m star material. Thunder set!” Lightning arced down and set his horns crackling. “Take this! Electric horns!” Lambo bent over and charged.

Hisui covered his eyes, expecting it to be no different than the time he had tried that on Renato.
“You stand out too much,” Levi said. “The one who’ll fulfill the role of Lightning Guardian and gain the most trust from the boss will be me!” Those hilts on his back all flew out and formed a circle in the air; they were umbrellas, and every last one of them was gathering a charge. They released it at Lambo, who jerked to a stop and cried out in pain, then collapsed.

Lambo cried; he sat up; he tried to stand.

Levi sent one of those umbrellas to pierce through Lambo’s shoulder. “I won’t let you run away. I will kill you thoroughly. I’ll cut you up and make steak out of you.”

“I feel like a damn sadist watching this,” he complained to his lover as Lambo picked up the fallen bazooka and shot himself with it. From out of the smoke came a twenty-five year old Lambo. “Wow, he grew up nice.”

Renato poked him in the side.

He smacked his lover’s hand. “Don’t be perverted.”

“Ah, this situation,” Lambo said. “If I’m not dreaming, I must be…” He glanced over at the audience and smiled slightly. “I didn’t think I’d get to see you guys again. All your faces… How nostalgic.”

‘What the hell does that mean?’

“It’s enough to move me to tears. But it seems like this is no time to be emotional. There’s a very rough-looking person staring at me.”

Levi looked very put out, in fact. “It doesn’t matter who you are. I’m going to kill you,” he asserted. His umbrellas went out again and started charging, then fired, just as lightning came down from the sky and hit the rods. Levi turned away from the sight and started walking, sure of his victory.

“Hey. Where do you think you’re going?” Lambo asked.

“What!?” Levi looked over his shoulder to see a perfectly fine Lambo.

“Watch.” Lambo crouched down and placed a hand on the floor. “Electric Reversal!” All the electricity stored in his horns drained into the building and shattered all the windows. “Electricity is like a kitten to me,” he said calmly. “Do you understand now?”

“I really took a gamble on his potential in becoming Lightning Guardian,” Iemitsu said. “It seems he’s even exceeded my expectations.”

‘If it wasn’t against the rules or my principles, I would hurt you so bad, you asshole,’ he thought as Lambo charged the spare set of horns, which had hit the floor again, and were, apparently, his. ‘Gods this is confusing,’ he complained. ‘If it wouldn’t devastate Nana-chan I would seriously consider causing an accident of heinous proportions to send Iemitsu-san off to a long-term care ward.’

Twenty-five year old Lambo had learned how to extend electricity and flames outward from his horns, so he did not need to get so close as his younger versions did. He charged and nailed Levi, knocking him to the ground and bloodying him badly. Unfortunately, inevitably, the timer ran down and five year old Lambo reappeared, and promptly fell over. He looked to be unconscious.

“In the end, the one who is more suited to the role of Lightning Guardian is still me,” Levi said.

“You’ll be disqualified if you interfere,” Renato reminded Tsuna, who looked all of two seconds
away from charging in to snatch Lambo away.

“That’s correct,” said a Cervello. “One step onto the battleground will cause your disqualification and confiscation of your ring.”

Levi’s foot raised up over Lambo’s head. It went down, then kicked. Lambo went flying. Hisui stared at lemitsu with hatred, but he also felt it for himself, and for Levi, and even the Vongola in general at that moment.

Tsuna started forward.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Renato asked.

Tsuna stopped and looked back. “I have to protect Lambo-kun!”

“No matter how important they’re said to be … the Vongola rings … the position as the next boss … I can’t battle for such things. But my friends… I don’t want my friends to be hurt!” Tsuna said, the flames sputtering out.

“Stop that rubbish,” said a new voice, then Tsuna went flying.

The only reason Hisui wasn’t frothing was because the kitten had destroyed the battleground’s capacity, so Lambo should not be in any immediate danger from it. Levi was another story. But, given that Tsuna had already caused a forfeit, there should be nothing to stop him from bringing Lambo to him directly if the asshole should try to kill the child again.

Xanxus was standing atop the stairwell room. “What’s up with that expression?” he asked Tsuna. “Can it be that you were seriously thinking you could defeat me and become the successor?”

For a split second Tsuna had a look of condescension on his face, but it quickly morphed. “I wasn’t thinking about that at all! I just don’t want to lose any of my friends in these battles!”

Xanxus looked shocked for some reason. His hand came up, wreathed in dark flame. “I see… You!”

A Cervello jumped that way. “Xanxus-sama, please don’t! If you interfere here, the meaning of the scramble battles will be—please put away your fists!”

Xanxus flung a hand out and slammed the girl with those dark flames. “Shut up!” She hit the ground on level with the destroyed mechanisms. “I haven’t lost my temper,” Xanxus claimed. “Rather, I’m becoming quite excited.” He smiled fiercely. “Now I finally understand the reason the old geezer chose you as his successor, even if it was only temporary. Whether it’s this rotten talk, or that weak flame, you and the old fart are similar in many ways.”

“Eh?”
Xanxus started laughing. “We’ll have a tragedy—no, a comedy here! Hey, you women. Continue.”

“Yes,” the unharmed one said. “Leviathan is the winner of this battle. And, due to Sawada-san’s interference, the Sky Ring is also forfeit to the Varia.” She moved to retrieve the Lightning Ring from where it had dropped, then plucked the ring from around Tsuna’s neck.

Hisui reached out and brought Lambo to him, to cradle in his arms. No one even seemed to notice. A diagnostic spell—which he was admittedly not skilled at—showed him the cow was in something akin to a healing coma. Had he had just enough energy left to pull the trigger before lapsing into unconsciousness? Had something happened to him while he was ten years into the future to worsen his condition?

The Cervello approached Xanxus and offered them to him. “Xanxus-sama, here are the rings.”

Xanxus tucked the Lightning Ring in his pocket, but wore the complete Sky Ring. “It’s only natural that this ring is here. Who other than me can be the Vongola Decimo? The rest of the rings don’t matter. I can order you guys to be killed under the name of the Vongola any time now.”

“That can’t be!” Tsuna shrieked.

He shook his head slightly. ‘How many damn times does it have to be said before it sinks in?’

“Still, it wouldn’t be fun to just kill you, the one chosen by that old fart. There’ll be plenty of time to kill you later, after letting you taste real despair in the scramble battle for the rings. Just like that old fart.”

“Did he just say what I think he meant?” Renato whispered.

“I—”

“Xanxus, you bastard!” Iemitsu shouted. “What did you do to the ninth!?”

Xanxus laughed. “Isn’t investigating that matter your job, external advisor?”

“Y-you bastard,” Iemitsu hissed. “Don’t tell me—!?”

“Iemitsu, calm down,” Renato urged. “There’s no actual evidence.”

“What does this mean?” Tsuna asked quietly. “What did Xanxus-san do?”

“Rejoice, trash. I’m giving you guys another chance. We will continue the rest of the matches as scheduled. If by some slim chance you guys can win this battle by majority, I will give you the Vongola rings and the position of boss. But if you lose, everything you hold dear will be … eliminated. Be sure to show me the power that was chosen by that old fart.” Xanxus turned his attention to the Cervello. “You women, be ready.”

“…Yes. Tomorrow’s match up will be the battle between the Storm Guardians.”

“Iemitsu,” Renato said quietly. “You fly to Italy. I’m worried about Nono.”

“Yeah. Sorry, Sinclair. I’ll entrust Tsuna-kun and the others to you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about them. I know them better than you, after all,” Renato said, slipping in a slight dig.

“Lambo-kun!” Tsuna cried. “Where did he go!”
Hisui had already dropped over the side of the building and was speeding off toward the hospital. He couldn’t count on the set-up Dino had used for Basil, so he went to the proper one. “Lightning strike, rolled down a hill after he got hit,” he told the emergency room personnel and, “His name is Vicario Lambo.” He blithely tossed compulsions around in order to get his charge to a doctor as quickly as possible, and settled in to wait on a diagnosis.

Renato joined him an hour later, taking the seat next to his. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a tri-folded set of papers, and handed them over. Hisui opened them and stared.

“I know, it’s a bit of a shock.”

“Yes.”

“It’s obvious to me you love the cow brat. I can learn to tolerate him for your sake,”

“Assuming he survives.”

Renato scoffed. “Please. You’d have said something already if you were worried about any lasting harm. There’s no way in hell your intuition would have reacted the way it did when Levi was after him otherwise, so if it hasn’t acted for this… If you were truly uneasy you’d have kidnapped the kid and not allowed him to participate, or arranged for some kind of accident to temporarily put him out of commission. The last thing in the world I’d want to do is discourage you from feeling something.”

He snorted softly. “Unless it’s anger toward you.”

“Yes.”

“How long have you had these?”

“Since right after Levi went for him. That’s when I was certain, so I went ahead and finished pulling the strings I started on a while back. It’s been over a year since you started teaching the cow. I’ve watched you become more and more invested in him. I made plans in case it ever got to the point where it was blatantly obvious.”

“Is that even possible with me?”

Renato slipped an arm around his shoulders and snickered. “To ninety-nine percent of the population? Hell no.”

Hisui folded the papers and tucked them away. “I feel so disgusted with myself.”

Renato nodded. “But more so with Iemitsu.”

“Yes. I’m a little angry with Lambo-kun, too, if you want total honesty. He shouldn’t have fucked around like that. All this damn posturing drives me up the wall.” He was pulled closer for a moment.

“So, when he’s better, and you can train him again, impress firmly into that fuzzy little head that if you’re in a fight, you don’t stop to chatter or explain shit. You just get on with it. Because, if you do it right, the target will be too dead to care about the fact that you took the time to whip out some charts and explain the theory behind some aspect of molecular chemistry or whatever. Every person who gets switched back by that bazooka is different depending on what the hell happened recently. Or hell, they might be from alternate versions of Earth, coming from a background of different events. All you can do is train this Lambo, and beat the stupidity out of his head.”

He sighed and nodded. “I was having this pleasant little daydream before you got here.”
“Oh?”

“I was imagining that Iemitsu-san had been the one tapped for Sky Arcobaleno.”

Renato laughed. “Dios mio, that would have been hilarious with how we feel now. He’s too old now, though, I expect. Still—”

“Yo.”

He looked over to see Shamal approaching.

“Any word yet?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I’ll wait with you, shall I? I can be your interpreter!” Shamal took a seat on the arm of the cheap sofa, on Renato’s side.

A doctor finally came in search of Hisui and started explaining Lambo’s condition. He only understood about half of it, but Shamal was nodding away and asking questions. Before the doctor could wander away another compulsion was tossed out, just in case.

“Right,” Shamal said. “Kid’s in minor critical, but I expect he’ll pull through just fine. How about we sneak on into his room and look personally? Maybe do some meddling?”

Hisui got up and headed for the room the doctor had specified. All three of them were good at sneaking around, but he was prepared to cheat. Lambo was set up in a room of his own in the critical care ward and hooked up to innumerable monitors. He snorted softly when he saw a mesh bag off to the side with Lambo’s horns and cow onesie in it. Heaven only knew if one of them had tried to divest Lambo’s hair of all the items he usually kept in it.

Renato reached out and laid a hand on the boy’s cheek and focused. “Interesting. I’m fairly certain the cow was healed by someone at the other end to a degree, and maybe some kind of preventative measures put in place. That kick of Levi’s should have done far worse damage than what I’m feeling. There should be broken bones.” He pulled back and examined Lambo with Leon in magnifying glass form. “He’ll pull through, tesoro,” he said, Leon returning to his usual form and being placed on Renato’s hat. “He’ll be in that coma for a while, but he’ll be fine.”

He exhaled and nodded, and took the bag. If nothing else he could see to the tiny outfit’s cleaning, and repair if necessary.

“All right,” Shamal said, “I’m heading out. See you around.” He gave a lazy wave and sauntered away.

“You going to lurk here, or come home?” Renato asked.

“I’ll come home. I’m sure if I need to be here in a hurry I’ll get woken up. I can always teleport invisibly. For now, it’s time to get some sleep. I can return in the morning.” He eyed the boy, and his hair, and cast a mild aversion charm on it. He did not want some helpful nurse to come along and try to mess with it for any reason. “Okay, let’s go.” The second they were in a blind, safe spot, he teleported them home. The bag went onto the kitchen counter for the time being.

The next morning he was awake and grumpy; his sleep had been restless and unsatisfying. Renato gave him a lingering kiss before heading out to shadow Tsuna for the day. Hisui cleaned and repaired the onesie with a few twitches of his hand, restored the missing tail, and also cleaned the
horns. They went back into the bag and he brought it along when he returned to the hospital.

He had not been there long, slouched in a chair and reading, when Nana walked in briskly, then darted over to the bed, her eyes wide and teary. “Hisui-kun? What happened? He was fine when I went to bed. I came over the second Ren-kun said something.”

“Apparently he decided that a stroll in the rain was a good idea,” he said with a shrug. “His umbrella was hit by lightning and he tumbled down a hill. I happened to be out on a walk because I was having trouble sleeping and found him, brought him straight here. He will be fine, Nana-chan. He was in critical care earlier, but as you can see, he’s just in a private room, now.”

“But shouldn’t we contact his guardian? I know, he’s been staying with me, but—”

He shook his head. “Ren-kun gave me a present last night: custody papers. He did some checking and found out that Lambo-kun didn’t really have one. Now he does. You and Ren-kun are listed as secondary contacts here at the hospital, so if for some reason I get unavoidably called out of town, you can still get answers regarding his condition.”

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, a hand flying to her mouth. “I never actually realized—”

The door opened again and Kyoko and Haru ran in; they were both breathing heavily from exertion. “Sawada-san,” Kyoko gasped out.

“How’s Lambo-chan?” Haru cried in distress.

“How did Lambo-kun get like this?”

“What happened?”

He let Nana field the questions instead of butting in. The last thing he wanted to deal with was emotional and panicky girls.

Renato arrived home at an hour past midnight and joined him on the sofa. “So, to recap, it was limited to fifteen minutes. We learned that Bel uses wires to guide his knives, he goes batshit insane when he sees his own blood, and Hayato almost pulled a win. However, they were down to the last minute before the whole place got blown sky high, and Tsuna flipped out. Hayato decided that doing what his boss wanted was more important than potentially dying in a common brawl to get the other half of the ring, so he retreated. Though, Tsuna’s rather sappy and impassioned speech about what they were fighting for—being able to go out and do things as friends—made me roll my eyes a bit.”

He nodded. “Still, it sounds like Hayato is starting to get being both the eye and the fury. And the school?”

“They had exploding wind turbines in there. It’s a mess, but I noticed additional Cervello in the area, so I assume they’re responsible for fixing things up, or at least hiding the damage, until all of this is over. I’m pretty proud of Hayato, actually. He got a bad start, but he figured out what tricks Bel was using and used his head. Then he dithered a little too much on getting the half ring and ended up in that brawl, but… Still, he did well. The next battle is Rain.”

“I dread to think what they’ll come up with for that one. Maybe they’ll make it rain inside?”

“Flood the place?”

“Make them fight while swimming?”
“An introductory battle with giant octopi?”

“Giant sharks? It would be both a play on Squalo’s name and something of an insult.”

“Ooo, that would be super cool. Though how they’d transport something like that… You coming to this one?”

He sighed. “I should have gone to tonight’s.”

“It’s fine that you didn’t, so long as one of us is there. If you want to skip this one it’s fine. Though I think watching the Mist Battle would be something. Illusionist fights are usually pretty spectacular.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “All right. I’ll come again for the Mist Battle. By then I should feel… And you’re right, illusion fights are something else to witness, so long as you can keep your mind. Nana-chan spent a bit of time at the hospital with me. She seems to be more than a little annoyed with Iemitsu-san at the moment, which I find hilarious.”

“He left a note with Tsuna before he left for Italy, that the kitten gave to his mother. She didn’t look too thrilled when she read it. It basically just told her to help Tsuna and not ask any questions.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s just as well he’s head of CEDEF. I’d hate to think of him as the tenth. Let’s go to bed, shall we? There’s plenty enough to do tomorrow. Maybe after this is all over and we’re all preferably still alive, we can take a short vacation or something.”

“Let’s, but allow me to tell you the last of it. When the next match was announced we were interrupted by Levi, who announced that his unit was being decimated. Hibari had returned and was ‘cleaning up’. He’s kind of pissed about the damage to the school. Levi went to attack, but Hibari calmly tripped him. It was embarrassing, really. Anyway, Hibari was convinced to back off for the time being. Dino and Romario hauled Hayato away for healing, so he’s being taken care of, but before that he gave some pointers to Takeshi.”

He nodded and got up, drawing Renato up with him, and headed to their bedroom. Renato tucked away a set of portkeys to take with him the next day, just in case, of the sort he could put on people’s wrists, like slap bracelets. If Takeshi lost, it was all lost, and Tsuna and his friends were in danger of being wiped out.

Lambo was still unconscious the next morning, but he seemed to be improving if Hisui’s discreet diagnostic checks meant anything. Nana visited again, as well as Kyoko and Haru. It was just as well he was staying away for a few days; listening to Tsuna whine and bemoan his fate would be enough to make him want to punt the kid halfway across Japan.

Renato was amused when he got home. “They sealed off one of the buildings and fashioned an elaborate set of waterfalls, of a sort. The whole time the water level kept rising. And hey, guess what?”

“If we got one right—a shark?”

“Yes!” Renato smirked. “And they’re still using that cow tail I retrieved in their little ritual at the start.”

“Wait, what?” He eyed his lover in confusion. “I knew that outfit lost its tail, but…”

“I retrieved it that night, the piece that got burnt off. Before the Storm Battle I handed it over and they used it as a stand-in for Lambo. They did the same tonight. Even Basil is joining in on the huddle.”
“So, they might be driven up the wall by Lambo-kun, but they still see him as part of the team,” he said thoughtfully. “Good. So what happened?”

“Everyone but Takeshi and Squalo were hustled out and set to watching the match on an image they projected onto one of the school walls. Takeshi got to show off what he learned from his father, the Shigure Sōen. I swear, the kid’s a natural born assassin. He fights mostly without fear.”

“I’m sure that’ll come in handy down the road if he’s sent out to handle Vongola interests, assuming he doesn’t bugger off at some point to be a full-time baseball player.”

“Mm. Well, Squalo has already defeated someone using that style, but there was something about it in which he lacked understanding. Takeshi is a stubborn brat, I’ll give him that much. Something Squalo said sparked a thought or idea or realization in the kid’s head. He got back up, bleeding like mad, and asserted once again that the Shigure Sōen style was ‘flawless and invincible’. He then proceeded to create his own version of the eighth form, and then a brand new one as ninth.

“We also saw Squalo’s artificial hand in action when the damn thing bent back at the wrist and skewered Takeshi, or what he thought was Takeshi, allowing the boy to come at him behind and above. He got the half ring and combined them. And then, of course, when Xanxus said Squalo’s time was up, the Cervello intervened and announced that the shark was on the move.”

“Release the sharks,” he muttered, thinking back to Mafia Land.

Renato grinned, obviously making the connection. “Squalo went missing after that. The Cervello announced the next match as Mist. We’re getting way too close to the end and the kitten still hasn’t unlocked that technique. He is doing a lot better at regulating his flame output so he can stay in Dying Will Mode beyond the initial five minute limit, so it’s not like he’s outright failing.”

“If they win Mist and Cloud, it shouldn’t matter, but—” He sighed.

“Yeah. Xanxus is too tricky. He’s got something up his sleeve, something terrible. True, maybe his words about Nono were just to throw people off their game and to get Iemitsu out of the country, but I’m having trouble believing that.”

“If Tsuna-kun’s still not making the required progress, we can consider springing the information about that last assassination attempt on him. Whatever it takes to shock it out of him.”

Renato nodded. “I agree. I assume the cow is still out of it?”

“Yes, but continuing to improve. Makes me want to spend time pouring over medical texts and learning magical healing. What little I can do is … weak. Maybe I’ll stop by one of the districts in the morning. I might be hampered when it comes to fine control because I refuse to use a wand, but… We’ll see, I guess.”

“If you want to sneak in for the others and magic some healing potions into them…”

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“Maybe after, then.”

The next morning he stopped by the hospital to check in on Lambo, then left shortly after Nana arrived for a visit. He scoured the shelves at the bookstore and purchased a good dozen, then inscribed them with runes to make them unappealing to others. That way he could read them in
They assembled that night at the gymnasium. Tsuna seemed dazed for some reason, not to mention surprised. He had been brought in on Basil’s back. “He passed out when he saw Kakimoto and Jōshima at that little market at the bus stop, down the mountain,” Renato whispered to him, then said normally, “It’s time for our Mist Guardian to come forward.”

The doors to the gym opened again to reveal Kakimoto and Jōshima. Team Tsuna freaked out, and Renato quickly said, “Calm down. They’re escorting the Mist Guardian.”

Behind the two was someone in the shadows, and the hairstyle was the same as Mukuro’s. What the team did not notice in their panic was that the figure was much shorter and shaped wrong. In response to Tsuna squeaking Mukuro’s name, the figure spoke—in Italian for some reason. “Negative. I am named Chrome Dokuro.”

She stepped forward, out of shadow. She wore a modified Kokuyo uniform, held Mukuro’s trident, or a duplicate of it, and her right eye was covered with a patch.

“Don’t be fooled,” Hayato snarled. “Just look at her. She’s been possessed by Rokudo. He’ll do anything to get what he wants! That’s the kind of guy he is!”

Chrome’s expression changed from a tentative smile to one of vague unhappiness. “It looks like you don’t believe me.”

“Of course not!” Hayato said. “Just look at that weapon! Besides, that patch has to be hiding that shady eye!”

“But she’s not … Rokudo Mukuro,” Tsuna said quietly.

“No? You really think so?” Hayato asked.

“You spoke for me,” Chrome said. “Thank you.” She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on Tsuna’s cheek. “Boss.”

He rolled his eyes as another round of freaking out ensued. It was bad enough that Tsuna did it so often; they didn’t need the rest of the team picking up the habit.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!?” Hayato demanded.

“…Greeting.”

“Well, what should we do,” Ryohei asked. “Let her join us?”

“Why should we?” Hayato replied. “Besides, we don’t even know where the hell she popped up from!”

Kakimoto and Jōshima shifted positions, going for their weapons at the perceived insult.

“Ken, Chikusa, calm down,” Chrome said evenly. “This isn’t something for you to decide. Boss,” she said to Tsuna. “Is it that I’m not worthy of the position of Mist Guardian? I wish to battle as the Mist Guardian, but… But if Boss won’t allow it no matter what, then I’ll abide by his decision.”

“You don’t have any other options,” Renato pointed out. “Chrome is it.”

Tsuna looked down and was silent for some time, then nodded to himself. “Then… We’ll leave it to you,” he told her.
Chrome exhaled … in relief? “Thank you,” she said quietly.

Colonnello arrived, flown in by his animal companion. There was some question in his mind as to whether or not Mammon was an Arcobaleno. Hisui did not understand where the uncertainty was. How many people could possibly be running around at that size and apparent age, as a member of the Varia, even, and not be an Arcobaleno? Just because Colonnello couldn’t feel any resonance from his pacifier simply meant that Mammon must have figured out a way to conceal his.

“This time, the battlefield will be the entirety of the gymnasium,” said the Cervello as Chrome walked away from their grouping. “The objects in the building can be used in any way you desire. Furthermore, this field hasn’t been outfitted with any special installations. There is no need for perplexity.”

Before Tsuna could display his continuing ignorance Hisui said, “Illusionists don’t need extras. Creating something from nothing, and nothing from something. They bewilder the enemy, rendering the famiglia’s true form intangible with visions of deceit. That is the role of the Mist Guardian.”

“The audience area has been set up in designated spaces within this building. As with the Storm Battle, infrared-triggered lasers have been installed. Please be careful. Then, the Mist Battle: Mammon versus Dokuro Chrome—begin!”

Tsuna got caught up in Chrome’s opening illusion move, necessitating a slap to the back of his head. “You already know this technique,” Renato said sharply.

Mammon counterattacked, ensnaring Chrome with tentacles and lifting her off the floor, choking her. Chrome’s illusion abruptly broke, rendering the room sane again.

“What is it with people and tentacle fetishes?” he muttered.

“Much too weak,” Mammon said disparagingly. “You won’t even make a good side show.”

“Who are you talking to?” Chrome appeared behind Mammon, revealing that what was being held up was actually a wheeled cart full of basketballs. “Over here.”

Team Tsuna broke out in a babble of questions. Renato sighed. “Again, this is an illusion battle. Both are creating and using illusions. This kind of battle is impressive, even spectacular, and something you won’t often see.”

The tentacles retracted and vanished. “Oh good,” Mammon said. “You’re more or less a worthy opponent. Then, I can use that to my heart’s content.” The chain around the chibi’s neck loosened and started to slide to the floor. “Let’s go, Phantasma.” The frog on Mammon’s head morphed into something like a snake-lizard hybrid. It was mostly snake-like in nature, but it did have tiny front and back legs. As the chain dropped entirely a pacifier was revealed; it began to glow, as did Colonnello’s.

“So, Viper,” he remarked.

That “snake” allowed Mammon to levitate; perhaps it was some special ability that came out when the animal was in ouroboros shape.

“I had heard that he was missing in action,” Colonnello commented. “I didn’t think he was still alive. Why didn’t my pacifier light up until now?”

Renato shrugged. “I assume it has to do with that chain.”
“A foolish chibi like you wouldn’t understand,” Mammon said scornfully. “It’s a byproduct of research. Unlike you, I’m never negligent in efforts to lift the curse.”

“This isn’t good,” Colonnello said. “The average illusionist can’t stand up against that stupid chibi.”

“Don’t be so quick to make that judgment, Colonnello. Dokuro is no ordinary illusionist.”

“No matter who you are,” Chrome promised, “I won’t lose.” She attacked, spinning her trident and seemingly missing Mammon, but when she finished the Arcobaleno was wrapped up in dozens of snakes.

Mammon seemed surprised that they were real and not illusions. Naturally, this freaked out members of Team Tsuna again, with accusations of the girl being possessed. How else could she use one of Mukuro’s techniques otherwise?

Mammon broke free. “It’s about time I unleashed my own powers, too. Thereafter, your true identity can be exposed at leisure.”

Chrome attacked again, spinning the trident and slamming the butt against the floor. Jets of red-hot magma shot upward, and Mammon’s companion shot off to the side.

“Your illusions are indeed first class,” Mammon commented. “If one believes even for an instant in the reality of those columns of fire, one would be roasted alive. Therefore… Your weakness is also illusion!” The columns froze solid a second later.

Unfortunately, Chrome was caught in it, her breath coming out as puffs of vapor. Most of the team was caught. Hisui only allowed enough of a loosening of control over his own mind to be able to see what was being attempted, but not even close enough to become ensnared.

“The art of illusion seizes control of a person’s perception—that is to say, it infiltrates the brain that governs the five senses. The stronger the illusionist’s abilities, the more complete the infiltration.”

“I swear, way too many people like to give lectures when they should be fighting. I suppose in this case we should be grateful the other side likes to boast,” he muttered.

“Their illusion’s rate of success is also heightened, and its hold over reality stronger. Thus, in the illusionist’s case, if their illusion is successfully countered with illusion, it means that control of their own perception will be completely snatched away.”

Ice started to creep up from the floor to encase Chrome’s legs.

“How is it? The abominable power of the Arcobaleno… Well then, how about you reveal your true identity now?”

Chrome made a defiant face at the chibi.

“No matter what you have in mind, it’s already too late. Because you are already a denizen of my world of illusions.”

Chrome used her trident to flip her body and bring her legs down to smash the ice against the floor.

“Hm. It seems as though that weapon is fairly important to you,” Mammon remarked.

Even as Chrome cried out in fear, the trident shattered in her hand. Her hand went up to cover the blood suddenly trickling from her mouth. She started coughing up more, then collapsed backward,
part of her stomach sinking inward. “Mukuro-sama,” she forced out, yet more blood dribbling out the side of her mouth.

“It’s hard to believe,” Mammon said. “It seems as though this girl’s life was being sustained with illusionary organs.”

“Mukuro-sama, I wanted to help you…”

Tsuna jerked in place and stared hard at the girl, somehow managing to have both wide eyes and a furrowed brow. Fog or mist began to appear around Chrome, slowly obscuring her from view.

“Oh, marshaling the last of one’s strength to conceal their own unsightly corpse,” Mammon said disdainfully. “It’s a common behavioral pattern of female illusionists.”

Tsuna clutched at his head. “He’s coming. It’s him… He’s coming!”

The trident began to reform in the hand not covered with mist, along with a black glove. And then, that creepy laughter sounded.

“Eh? A man’s voice?” Mammon mused. He was heartily surprised when debris started flying straight at him, causing him to shift around quickly to avoid any of it. And yet, he was not fast enough, and hit the floor, despite his snake’s attempts to keep him afloat.

Out of the mist came Mukuro. “You Varia are awfully flashy for mafiosi. It’s been a while. I’ve come back—” He glanced over his shoulder at Tsuna. “—from the other side of the cycle.”

“Is that the true form of the Mist Guardian?” Colonnello asked quietly.

Renato ignored him.

Mammon slowly sat up. “Rokudo Mukuro… I was wondering where I’d heard that name before. Now I remember. About a month ago someone attempted to escape Vendicare. That person’s name was Rokudo Mukuro.”

“He broke out again!?” Tsuna cried.

“But, it should have been over when the escape attempt failed. I heard that he was thrown back into a prison even more difficult to escape from.”

Mukuro laughed that creepy laugh. “The information gathering capabilities of the Vongola’s elite special assassination squad, Varia, isn’t that well informed after all. I’m right here, aren’t I?”

“What a troublesome guy.” Mammon said, back to hovering a distance off the floor. “All right, let’s clear things up. You are merely an illusion created by that girl, right?”

“Oh?” Mukuro replied as ice started crawling up his legs and a blizzard began to rage in the gym.

“I’m not so good-natured that I would let myself lose to an illusion,” Mammon stated. As the ice finished encasing Mukuro he continued, “Well now, looks like you’ve been unmasked. The one who’ll be smashed into pieces should be the body of that girl, right?” He sped forward.

But then Mukuro’s right eye changed symbols and a series of vines erupted from the floor just in front of him, in a blur fast enough to capture Mammon, wrapping around him and blossoming lotus flowers. “Kufufufu. Who is just an illusion?” he asked as the ice melted away as vapor.

“What’s this … power!? The … pain!”
“Even Mammon is overwhelmed?”

“He’s the real thing, after all,” Hayato said. “But if that’s the case, what happened to the girl?”

“You can’t consider Chrome and Mukuro as separate beings,” Renato explained. “Because there is Chrome, Mukuro can exist. Because there is Mukuro, Chrome can live.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s all I’m going to explain at this time,” Renato said firmly.

“Come on, what’s the matter, Arcobaleno?” Mukuro taunted. “If you keep taking your time, I’m going to wrap things up…”

Mammon finally broke free and … exploded … into multiple clones of himself. “Don’t get cocky!”

“So weak,” Mukuro said, his eye shifting and flame appearing over it. He lashed out with his trident.

“An illusionist who resorts to hand-to-hand combat is heresy!” Mammon declared. “I denounce you and your reincarnation cycle rubbish!”

“Oh?”

“Humans will repeat the same life many times in infinite cycles. That’s why I must keep hoarding my money!”

‘Kami-sama,’ he thought as he could just barely see the room warping into a cylindrical shape.

“Kufufufu! A greedy Arcobaleno! How interesting. But… When it comes to greed, I won’t lose, either.” Lotus flowers and vines erupted everywhere, in all directions. Team Tsuna started clutching at their heads and complaining of nausea.

“Such strong powers of illusions,” Mammon said with unwilling admiration. “Where did you—”

“Hell.”

“Stop talking rubbish!” Mammon cloned himself again and sent all of them at Mukuro. One slipped by and switched direction mid-air, throwing out a cloak of darkness over his opponent. “Die!” The snake increased in size again and developed sharp spikes, then squeezed the cloaked figure, to no avail, as it all exploded into vines and lotus once more.

“Descent into hell… Then, return again.” He held up both halves of the Mist Ring. “I just have to rejoin these rings, correct?”

“Y-yes,” stuttered a Cervello.

“Not so fast!” Mammon seemingly reformed from dark motes and laughed. “I was just playing with you. Don’t get so cocky! I have yet to show you the full extent of my powers!”

The room started to warp again. “You know this very well, don’t you?” Mukuro said conversationally. “What it means when your illusions are countered by another’s? It means you have completely lost control over your own perceptions.”

Phantasma dropped down over Mammon’s head and started to strangle him.

“Come, shall I show you what this thing we call power truly is?”
The room warped again and fell apart. He and Renato were the only two not completely caught up in it; and if Renato did fall into it he would snap him free.

“How does it feel, Arcobaleno!? This is my world!”

A dark mist formed and darted toward Mammon, arrowing into his mouth, shoving its way inside, bloating him up like Lambo’s hair, still with Phantasma around his throat. “Stop it!” Mammon choked out. “I’m going to die! I’m going to diiiieeee!”

“The reason you lost was because you had me as your opponent.”

Mammon exploded. The room went back to normal.

Mukuro held up the completed ring. “Is this … acceptable?”

“The Mist Ring now belongs to Chrome Dokuro, the winner.”

“How could you—you didn’t have to go so far!” Tsuna objected.

“Even now, you’re still showing sympathy for the enemy,” Mukuro said over his shoulder. “Just how naïve can you get, Sawada Tsunayoshi? But there’s no need to worry. That baby managed to escape. From the start he had every intention of reserving enough energy for that. He’s a shrewd one, that Arcobaleno.”

“…Gola Mosca,“ Xanxus said. “After the contest battles are over, eliminate Mammon.”

The construct shot out some steam as a response.

“My my, you really are the dark side of the mafia, aren’t you, Xanxus?” Mukuro said. “Even I would feel awed at this terrifying scheme you’ve thought up. But I have no intention of poking my nose into your business. Because I am not such a nice human being. Just one thing, though… The other candidate for successor, though smaller and weaker than you, is not really someone you should trifle with, for your own good.”

“Mukuro-sama!” Kakimoto said.


“It’s good to be vigilant,” Mukuro said in response to Tsuna’s guardians getting up in arms. “But I have no intention of colluding with the mafia. The only reason I have become your Mist Guardian,” he said to Tsuna, “is to set myself in a better position to possess your body.”

The guardians bristled again, but Tsuna waved his hands around to shut them up. “In any case… Thank you,” he said to Mukuro.

“A little … tired now… This girl…” Mukuro’s eyes closed and he toppled sideways, morphing back into Chrome as the body hit the floor.

Tsuna swallowed hard, his expression a bit lost.

“Don’t forget what Mukuro’s done to you,” Renato said quietly. “Don’t sympathize with him too much.”

“Since the battles are tied at three each, we will continue with the next battle, the Cloud Battle.”

“Xanxus,” Renato called, “do you plan to honor your agreement? If Hibari wins tomorrow, even
though you have the Sky Ring… When the time comes, you will abdicate all rights to be the successor.”

“Of course,” Xanxus said smoothly. “I have always respected the Vongola spirit. I will honor the promise of the battle. If Gola Mosca really loses the Cloud Battle, I will let you people have everything.”

Colonnello interrupted the comments from Team Tsuna with, “You guys are so naïve.”

“That Xanxus dared to say something like that…” Renato frowned faintly.

“Fishy as usual, his phrasing,” he said, then, “What are we going to do with Dokuro-chan? Those two boys have already left.”

“We could always stick her in with I-Pin for the night. Tsuna did accept her, after all. Or we check to see if it’s anything more than exhaustion, and then tuck her into a hotel room for the night. Honestly, how would you feel about waking up in some stranger’s home?”

“So we ask the kitten his opinion,” he replied, and reached out to yank Tsuna over. “Hey, your Mist Guardian is out cold. Are you comfortable with her spending the night at your house, or shall we drop her off in a hotel room?”

Tsuna stuttered for a few seconds, then looked at her. “She can stay at the house.”

“Right,” he replied, then went over to heft her up, being careful to keep her skirt from flipping around too much. ‘Honestly, who fights in such a short skirt?’ Renato opened the gymnasium door for him and he sped off into the night.

Tsuna made it to school the next day, mainly because he woke up so early. He was gone before they even got there; so was Chrome. They caught up with him in one of the lounges, talking to Dino. Hayato, Ryohei, and Takeshi were snoozing on sofas, and Tsuna looked ready to fall asleep himself.

“You have training to get to,” Renato said, causing Tsuna and Dino to jump in surprise and whip around. “You need to perfect the Zero Point Breakthrough technique by today.”

“Wait, what? But the battle today will decide things,” Tsuna said. “There’s no reason for me to train anymore, is there?”

‘I swear, he keeps backsliding.’

“It’s precisely because it’s the final battle,” Renato replied. “What will you do if something happens?”

“Kitten, use your damn brain,” he said. “If by some chance Hibari-kun loses, Xanxus-san is set to have all of you killed. Do you really intend to let that happen?”

“Oh, uh…”

Renato sighed and herded Tsuna toward the door. Hisui sent a text to Basil to meet up with them, and shortly thereafter they were all in a car driving to the Mountain of Death. By the time noon rolled around and they took a break for lunch, Hisui was feeling more than a little annoyed. Tsuna was getting better and better at extending the length of time he could stay in Dying Will Mode, but he had yet to drop into the opposing state.

Unfortunately, given that Basil was there, telling Tsuna about that last assassination attempt would
cause strife. Basil would be highly offended by the idea that his master had screwed up and carelessly placed both wife and son in danger, and Basil was currently necessary to Tsuna’s training. He exchanged a look of frustration with his lover before resuming his meal. On top of that, Tsuna had slept badly, so he was sleepy and bit sluggish.

Over the course of the afternoon Tsuna became prone to clumsiness, even in Dying Will Mode. Dinner was silent, and they went straight back to work afterward. When ten-thirty rolled around Tsuna suddenly realized what time it must be and said, “If we don’t go soon we’re going to miss Hibari-san’s battle!”

“Leave that to Hayato and Takeshi,” Renato said with a kick to Tsuna’s shin. “The only thing you have to do is concentrate on perfecting this technique.”

“Oh, that hurt! No way! Are you serious!?”

“I’m deadly serious. Again—if he loses that battle…”

Tsuna looked down.

Hisui got his earpiece into place and tapped it. “I’m going. I’m sure if Tsuna-kun wants to see the battle so damn badly he’ll stop letting his thoughts fly all over the place and get on with it.”

Renato nodded and wore his earpiece, as well, giving it a tap to activate it. “Later.”

He departed on foot; as soon as he was out of sight and hearing he apparated to Namimori and walked the remainder of the way. He arrived at about the same time as Hayato, Takeshi, and Ryohei. All three of them were sporting various bandages and sticking plasters, but they seemed well enough. Hibari strolled on up casually, but stopped when he saw them. “Why have you all gathered here?”

“We’re here to support you!” Ryohei said brightly.

Hibari hummed. “You’re an eyesore. If you’re not gone in the next second, I’ll kill you.” He was distracted from the babble of the three in response by something hitting the ground behind him. “All I have to do is bite you to death,” he said with a faint smile, staring over his shoulder at the then standing Gola Mosca.

The Cervello appeared and directed them to the field used for the P.E. classes and sports. It had been transformed into an arena enclosed by a barbed wire fence. It looked like something out of a war movie prisoner camp. “This is the field for the Cloud Battle. The mission of the Cloud Guardian is to be the aloof, drifting cloud, who protects the famiglia from an independent standpoint, and whom nothing can ever bind. Therefore, we have prepared the most extreme field for them.

“The field is surrounded on all sides by barbed wire, as well as eight turrets which will shoot at any mobile object it detects within a thirty meter radius. Furthermore, there are countless pressure-sensitive mines buried under the ground. Once activated, an alarm will sound followed by an explosion.”

He tuned out the posturing between sides and eyed the field. Dino had probably run himself ragged keeping one step ahead of Hibari, and he was well aware of Dino’s proficiency. It was probably much better already having had to deal with the prefect. They had only been able to push Dino so far in training; Hibari did not have their restrictions when it came to sparring.

In his earpiece he could hear Renato say, “You’ve got it, Tsuna.”
“Oh?” he murmured. An explosion followed. “Eh?”

“Sawada-dono!” Basil cried. “Hang in there, please!”

“You’ve done very well,” Renato said; he even sounded pleased.

“He can’t take much more of this! If we continue like this, Sawada-dono’s body will break!”

“Just then…” Tsuna was heard to say. “The flame… Some-somehow, just a little bit… I had a feeling like I know … what the first did with this technique.”

“Sawada-dono…”

“I see. And?”

“If Hibari-san should lose… Let’s keep going. I almost had it.”

Hisui smiled slightly.

“All right. Let’s keep going.”

Approximately a half hour went by when he heard through the earpiece, “Oh. You did it, Tsuna. That was the Dying Will Zero Point Breakthrough.”

“You did it! That was brilliant, Sawada-dono!”

“That was it… It’s quite an unexpected technique, though. It would have been absolutely impossible to do it alone. This is all thanks to Basil-kun, too. Thank you!”

“All right, Tsuna, let’s go,” Renato said.

A half hour after that the Cervello came out of their almost mannequin-like states. “Then, we shall begin. The Cloud Guardians must now enter the arena… The Cloud Battle: Gola Mosca versus Hibari Kyoya—begin!”

The battle was over in all of five seconds. Gola Mosca had started by flying toward Hibari, one gun hand extended forward and shooting. Hibari nimbly dodged everything and attacked as they crossed paths, caving in part of the head and severing an arm from the construct. A clicking sound was heard as Hibari snapped together the two halves of the ring; he then tossed it at the Cervello. “I don’t need this thing.”

One of the girls fumbled for a moment, then caught it, looking confused.

“Now you, the one sitting over there,” Hibari said, eyeing Xanxus. “Come over here. I can’t go home until I bite you to death, monkey boss of the mountain of monkeys.”

While Team Xanxus members were muttering amongst themselves, Xanxus just smirked and stood up.

“In case you didn’t get that,” he murmured, “Hibari-kun just won. And now he’s determined to fight and defeat Xanxus-san.”

“Great,” he heard.

Xanxus jumped up and into the arena, landed on Hibari’s upraised tonfa, then springboarded off it to land a short distance away. “My foot slipped.”
“Right.”

“No, really,” he said mockingly, then jumped again to avoid the mine he had landed on. “I came down only to retrieve that piece of junk. We have lost, after all.”

“Hn. Your face tells a different story,” Hibari said with indifferent disbelief, then he ran forward on the attack.

“What is he doing!?” Ryohei cried. “He already beat that mechanical monster!”

Hibari attacked, Xanxus dodged, and their pattern triggered any number of mines and gatling guns.

“Don’t worry, I won’t reciprocate,” Xanxus said.

“As you wish. I’m going to bite you to death.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “I hope to hell you guys are nearby.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think the shit’s about to hit the fan. I don’t think Gola Mosca is entirely broken. I see dim lights flashing in the face area and I would swear the remaining arm’s fingers just twitched.”

“We’re almost there.”

Just then a missile passed between Hibari and Xanxus, slicing a gash in Hibari’s thigh.

“Oh yeah, it’s gone all to hell.”

More missiles fired and things started blowing up. Mosca’s leg jets fired up.

“I only came to retrieve my junk,” Xanxus said, “but I’ve been obstructed by the Cloud Guardian all this time. Now Mosca’s restraining system has overheated and broken.” He sounded and looked entirely too happy about that.

“So that was his plan?” he muttered, moving over to protect as many of Tsuna’s friends as he could.

Xanxus cackled madly. “This is a terrible disaster!”

Chrome jumped up from her vantage and ran for it, but ended up in the arena due to the enclosure “walls” being blown to bits. Mosca targeted her, but she was knocked to the ground by Kakimoto and Jōshima. And then Tsuna arrived, saving the three of them from re-aimed fire.

“So you’re here,” Xanxus said, “but…”

Renato and Basil sprinted in and quickly located the main bulk of their allies. Mosca fired again, aiming missiles directly at Tsuna.

“Eliminate everything,” Xanxus said coldly, “starting with the scum. That has not changed.”

Tsuna calmly deflected all the missiles, launched himself upward and flew around so he could rip the other arm off the construct.

“Cool,” he remarked. “I see he figured that part out, too.”

Renato came to his side and nodded. “Well, yeah. I told him to open the damn door and fly the rest
“Hey, blockhead,” Tsuna said, eyeing Mosca. “I’m your opponent now.” He evaded another barrage of missiles and flew over to punch the construct. It went flying—not under its own power—and crashed into the ground so hard it left a wide gouge in the earth.

“Something just doesn’t feel right,” Renato said.

“Xanxus, what is this all about?” Tsuna asked, but was distracted by Mosca getting up again and coming after him. Tsuna pivoted and sliced with his hand, from the thing’s head down its chest, exposing the innards.

Xanxus looked transcendent with glee, but Tsuna’s expression betrayed his confusion as a body slowly slithered out, multiple monitors and cords attached to it. It was … an older man. It was the ninth. He hit the ground with a dull thud.

Tsuna’s flames sputtered out. “What… What’s going on?”

Renato dashed forward to check Nono’s health. Hisui followed.

“Eh? Why was he inside Mosca?” Tsuna asked.

“Hang in there,” Renato hissed, laying a hand on Nono’s face to exert his power. “Tch. I’ve seen schematics on Mosca’s construction just the once. It looks like Nono was forced to be its power source.”

“I think I understand now,” he muttered, glancing back at Xanxus, then returned his focus to Nono and cast a quiet diagnostic.

“Why!?” Tsuna cried.

“It’s not ‘why’, is it!” Xanxus crowed. “You’ve gone and killed the ninth! Well? Who was it who struck down the old man with no mercy whatsoever!? Who was it who split Mosca in half with the old man inside?”

“Me, it was me,” Tsuna whispered. “I killed the ninth.”

Hisui was about to cuff his student when Nono spoke.

“No,” he said weakly. “The one at fault was me. We finally get to meet, young Tsunayoshi. I’m sorry… All this happened because of my own weakness, my weakness that allowed Xanxus to awaken from his long sleep.” He coughed, a harsh hacking sound.

“Are you all right!? Please hang in there!”

“Tsunayoshi, I’ve always been hearing about you… About the girl you like, and your school, and your friends… You are a child with a heart that … is really mismatched to be a mafia boss. I also know that up until now, you have never once fought in a battle willingly. You always have these lines between your eyebrows… Clenched your fists as if praying… And that is why I chose you to be the Vongola Decimo,” Nono said with a weak, fond smile. He reached out his hand shakily and touched a flame-lit finger to Tsuna’s forehead.

Whatever the effect, it caused Tsuna to start crying and babbling.

“How dare you kill the ninth boss!?” Xanxus demanded.
Renato still had a hand touching Nono’s skin, and Hisui knew he was trying to help the man regenerate from his wounds. They should haul him away for immediate medical care, but Xanxus was not going to allow that.

“The despicable way you struck him down is a challenge against his own son, as well as the noble Vongola spirit! No need for investigation! The burns on his chest are undeniable evidence! Now that the boss has been murdered, these ring battles are meaningless! For the boss, my father, and for the future of the Vongola, I will kill you, as vengeance!”

Renato sighed. “I see it now. If his men had won the battles, those who knew of the Cradle Affair would object to his succession and would continue to oppose him. But if he trapped Tsuna into the role of villain, and attacked him in a battle of revenge, that’s a different matter. He would gain absolute trust from the majority of the famiglia. Besides, if he could prove himself stronger than Tsuna, who was actually chosen to be the successor, it would be further proof that he was deserving of heirship. In that case, he could easily eliminate anyone who opposed him.”

“Then Xanxus is planning to become the boss and establish a dictatorship at the same time?” Basil asked.

“Yes. It was a well laid out trap. I expect Mosca was supposed to kill all of Tsuna’s guardians in an ‘accident’. When that happened, he knew that sooner or later Tsuna would come to take it out.”

“Please refrain from speaking such wild conjectures out loud. We are officially recording everything that is spoken,” said a Cervello.

“Record whatever you want,” Renato said coldly. “My patience has run thin. But I will honor my promise to Nono and not interfere—with my student’s battles, that is. Having said that, I don’t know what my student, who hates fighting, will do.”

“…Xanxus,” Tsuna said tonelessly. “I will take that ring back. You will not follow in the ninth’s footsteps.”

“Well said, Tsuna,” Renato murmured.

“I’ll carve your name into Vongola’s history books as the foolish runt who dared to defy Xanxus all by his little self,” Xanxus promised darkly.

“He’s not alone!” Hayato shouted. “The boss’s will—”

“—is our will!” Takeshi finished.

Hibari said, “My will is my own.”

“You want some of this, you brats!” Levi shouted.

“Exterminate the traitors,” Xanxus commanded.

“Hold it right there, please,” a Cervello said firmly. “We will be in charge of the battle for the ninth’s revenge. We have a duty to oversee the whereabouts of the Vongola rings.”

“What the hell are you talking about!?” Hayato said. “You’re all Xanxus’s bitches!”

“Please watch your mouth,” she replied, unruffled, and held up a Sky Flame-sealed parchment. “We have an official decree from the ninth himself. Any changing-of-hands of the rings will not be approved without our ratification. The winner of this battle will be the Vongola Decimo, so, we
declare that there will be a Sky Ring Battle. It will be the last. How does that sound, Xanxus-sama?"

“Not a bad idea,” Xanxus replied.

“Then, tomorrow night, everyone will please assemble at Nami Middle.”

“Tomorrow will be the final chapter in this happy comedy. Make sure you’re up for it,” Xanxus said, then removed the ring, divided it, and flicked half at Tsuna. A bright light erupted and when it died down, the Varia and the Cervello were gone.

“Help the Vongola Nono and the injured,” Dino’s voice shouted.

He looked over to see the blond and at least a dozen of his men. They quickly scattered to start helping people, loading them onto gurneys. Dino jogged over to them and said, “I received word from the CEDEF team. I never thought it would come to this. Are you all right?”

Renato looked over at Tsuna, who was just standing there staring unseeingly at the ground. He frowned and aimed a kick at the boy’s calf, knocking him forward several steps. “We’re going home. You better get yourself properly recharged for tomorrow’s fight.”

“Why did you have to kick me!?”

‘At least he’s not wibbly anymore.’

“Because I’m really vexed right now. Don’t ask stupid questions. Now let’s go!”

“We can always dose him,” he murmured, knowing his lover would hear it. “It’s one way to ensure he actually sleeps.”

Renato hummed.
He spent the next morning at the hospital, reading magical medical texts.

Renato showed up just before lunch with food. “Still nothing?” he asked, handing over a bento.

He shook his head as he accepted it and materialized hashi instead of using the disposable ones. He was halfway through the meal when Lambo’s eyes opened. He set the food aside and went over to the bed. “Lambo-kun?” he said softly.

“Nagi-san?” Lambo warbled wearily. Then he seemed to wake up more. “Where is Lambo-san?”

“You were hurt in the ring battle, chibi. You’re in the hospital. Would you like something to drink?”

Lambo nodded.

He pulled a juice box from one of his pouches, detached the straw from the side, and jammed it into place. “It won’t be cold, unfortunately, but it’s grape,” he said, then supported Lambo’s head while he sipped. It took him a good ten minutes to finish the thing, and by then he was perky enough to sit up, though still weak.

“Nagi-san loves Lambo-san!”

He sighed and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

Lambo goggled at being directly addressed by his arch enemy and flopped back, quite overcome. Hisui smiled faintly and ran his hand over the child’s hair. “At some point you’re going to have to tell me where you came up with Nagi for me.”

Lambo blinked innocent green eyes at him. “Lambo-san combined your names! It’s his special idea. But then the others started using it, too.” He pouted.

“Yes, well, it’s still special, because you thought of it, all right?”

Lambo beamed and nodded. “How long will Lambo-san have to be here?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know, chibi. But the more you focus on getting better, the faster that’ll be.”

“Lambo-san is—” He paused to yawn hugely. “—hungry.”

“Hm.” He materialized a new set of hashi and plucked a piece of tamagoyaki from his bento to offer up. Lambo accepted it and chewed slowly.

“It was not as good as Nagi-san’s or Mama’s.”

“Perhaps not, but would you like another piece?” He was feeding a second piece to the boy when Nana arrived.
“Oh my! Lambo-kun is awake?”

“He woke up a few minutes ago,” he said, “but he’s tired and weak.”

Nana pulled up a chair on the other side of the bed and reached out to pet Lambo fondly and fuss over his blanket.

“When you get out of here, Lambo-kun, I’ll make you some of your favorites,” he promised. He had no idea how much willpower alone could do in terms of healing, but food was an incentive for the little guy. “Another piece?” When Lambo nodded he selected another one and offered it up. He managed two more pieces before Lambo insisted he wasn’t hungry, so he set the bento aside. The boy drifted off again a few minutes later, so Hisui finished his lunch.

“All right,” he said when he was done. “I need to go take a walk or something.”

“I’ll stay with him this afternoon,” Nana said immediately. “I’m sure the girls will stop by, as well, after school.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Nana-chan.” He left with Renato and walked with him back to the school.

“You have the outfit ready?”

Renato nodded. “Tsuna can put it on before we head to the battle tonight. I could wish this latest version had been field-tested, but we’ll see.”

He snorted. “Considering that we usually attack from a distance or the shadows, and neither of us is likely to get into an up-close flame brawl… If it works, great. We can make outfits for all of them. If not, I guess we figure out the next version based on what didn’t hold up.”

“I plan to bring the kitten to the hospital after dinner, to let him see the cow. Slide some ideas into his head.”

“I’ll see you there, then. For now I’m going to walk a bit more, then get back to reading those texts.”

“He regained consciousness around noon for a short time,” Renato told Tsuna. “He still needs rest, but he’s getting better.”

Tsuna laughed nervously. “That’s great. Lambo-kun…”

“People have been taking it in turns to keep an eye on him,” he said. “The fact that he woke up is a good sign. I don’t think he’ll be here much longer.”

“Okay… Eh… About the ninth…”

“He’s not here,” Renato said.

“Then… He’s…”

“He’s not dead,” he said flatly. “Dino moved him to a better suited and safer place, but it’ll be touch and go. He wasn’t doing well in the first place.”

Renato nodded and looked off to the side. “Anyway, we have something for you,” he said, and indicated a small case sitting on the window sill. “It’s a battle suit, using specially woven fibres. Leon helped with that. It can withstand the heat of Dying Will Flame.”
‘We hope.’

“Wait, if it’s a mafia suit, won’t I look like mafia!?” Tsuna asked, opening the case.

Renato scoffed. “We’re not that stupid, kitten. It resembles your school uniform. Hisui and I wear clothing made of the same materials. Look, poor Leon is thoroughly worn out having helped with this.”

Hisui smirked when Leon promptly flopped on the brim of his lover’s hat and managed to appear exhausted.

Tsuna looked up from the case, and reached out to pet Leon’s head gently. “Th-thank you, Leon.”

“He made you a bonus, too,” Renato added. “Once you get changed, we’ll get going, to the final ring battle.”

“Yeah…”

A few minutes later Tsuna emerged from the adjoining bathroom and they set off. Xanxus arrived with an explosion. Hisui rolled his eyes slightly and sighed. “Drama queen,” he muttered accusingly.

“So you came, trash,” Xanxus said.

Two Cervello jumped down from the roof to join the gathering. “We have been expecting you.”

‘No, really? I thought we all came here because Nami Middle is such a fantastic dance spot at night.’

“Then, the guardians for Sawada-san’s side… Storm, Sun, Rain, and Mist are all here.”

Chrome wandered around the side of the nearest building and joined her fellows.

“The only ones left are Cloud and Lightning.”

“Eh… The ones left—” Tsuna started to say.

He was interrupted by Hibari’s arrival. “What do you want?”

“Hibari-san! Eh, what do I want?”

“He’s together with us, right?” Hayato said.

Chrome stepped a little closer and said, “The Cervello said that the guardians had to come.”

“That’s correct,” a Cervello affirmed, “all the guardians who are still alive. We sent a compulsory summons.”

Noise off to the side alerted them to the arrival of the Varia. Mammon was in a cage held by Levi. Lussuria was strapped to a gurney.

“Looks like the Lightning Guardian for Sawada-san has also arrived,” a Cervello stated.

A third Cervello appeared, holding the child. Lambo was wearing an oxygen mask and there was a set of tanks on the ground next to her.

Hisui froze inside. If it would not have meant a bloodbath and a life on the run, he’d have killed every Cervello and Varia member on the spot. Renato reached over to squeeze his wrist gently,
comfortingly.

“Lambo-kun, too!?” Tsuna cried. “But he’s only just started to come out of his coma!”

“The compulsory summons do not take anything else into account,” a Cervello stated. “Because in the Sky Battle, the Sky Ring as well as the lives of the guardians are at stake.”

Tsuna’s shoulders hunched up, then he ran forward, shouting, “Give Lambo-kun back!”

“Stand down, please. The Varia are in the same position.”

“Yeah, quit complaining,” called out Lussuria. “Once the summons were received, no matter what condition we’re in, we have to assemble. That’s the duty of a guardian!”

“What about Squalo-san?” Takeshi asked. “Isn’t he here…?”

“You know very well the outcome of that battle. We are unable to verify his current status. Now, we will begin the proceedings. First, we will collect all the guardians’ rings.”

“After we fought to the extreme to get them, we have to give them back!?”

“If you are the true owner you have nothing to worry about. In the end, the Vongola rings will return to their true owners, anyway.” She held up a shallow tray as her fellow held up a second one. “Place them in here,” she said, approaching Team Tsuna. Her fellow did the same for the two the Varia held. “All confirmed.” The third Cervello took the trays and departed.

“We will now explain the rules of the Sky Battle. It will be similar to the other battles, as one of the conditions for victory is to join the two halves of each ring. However, the battlefield will be the entire school. In order to watch such a wide battlefield, we have installed large-screen displays at the observation box as well as various other locations. Also, the guardians will be using these wristbands installed with camera-equipped monitors.”

“So then,” said the second Cervello, “would all guardians please put on your wristbands, then make your way to the respective fields of your own battles.” She and her fellow handed them out.

“Huh? Our battlefield?” Levi asked. “What’s the point of that?”

“We are not entertaining questions. If you do not follow the rules you’ll be disqualified.”

Team Tsuna did the usual pre-fight huddle, then they dispersed to their original fight locations. While they were waiting more people arrived, Shamal and Colonello. Tsuna looked at them questioningly.

“I’m here to collect your ashes,” Shamal said.

“I just came to jeer.”

Tsuna gawked in disbelief.

“It looks as though all participants have arrived at their locations,” a Cervello stated. “We’ve set up a pole at each of the battlefields. The top of each pole contains the respective ring.”

“Wha—? The ring?” Hayato said, his voice coming through clearly in the projected image. “Don’t tell me we’re scrambling for them again?”

“In other words,” Belphegor said, “we’ll be fighting, too?”
“You are all free to do so. That is, if you’re able to.” Just then every guardian flinched or winced, many of them clutching at whichever wrist their bracelet was on, then started to crumple.

“Wh-what was that!?” Tsuna asked.

“All guardians were injected with a poison administered by their wristbands. The poison is called the Death Hitter. Once administered, it will paralyze the victim’s nerves. Even standing up will be difficult. Then, a burning pain will spread throughout the body, gradually increasing, until thirty minutes later … the victim will die.”

“Wh-what is the meaning of this!?” Tsuna demanded. “It’s supposed to be the Sky Battle, so why is everyone involved like this!?”

“Because the Sky is the mission of the boss. The Cloud, Lightning, Mist, Rain, Storm, and Sun, he influences all of them. He understands and accepts all of them. That is the Sky’s mission. In this battle, the lives of all the guardians are entrusted into the hands of the boss. That is the Sky Battle. There is only one way to stop the progress of the poison. That is to insert the matching ring into each guardian’s wristband. Once the ring is inserted into the indentation, it will activate the mechanism to administer the Death Hitter’s antidote stored in the wristband.”

“So this battle is not only for the Sky Ring. The guardians’ rings have also become a crucial element,” Renato stated.

“Yes. Therefore, the condition for victory in the Sky Battle is simply this: you must acquire all of the Vongola rings.” The Cervello held up a chain and presented it to Tsuna, while her fellow did the same for Xanxus. “Use this chain to collect the full set.”

“All right, I get it! Let’s hurry!” Tsuna said as he accepted the chain. “Otherwise, everyone will—!”

“Very well. One last thing. Once the battle has started, any outside interference from non-participating personnel is forbidden. That includes any special bullets.”

“Understood,” Renato said.

And then Xanxus started moving, and sucker punched Tsuna, sending him flying.

“Sawada-dono!” Basil cried in alarm.

“Xanxus-sama! Not yet!”

“Let’s hurry and get started… Wasn’t that what he said?”

“Yes, but that attack on Sawada-san is—”

“I cry foul, Xanxus-san!” Basil cried.

“My bad… Did I get him before he was shot with his special bullet?” Xanxus said mockingly.

“How foolish,” Renato said with a shake of his head. “Who do you think you’re dealing with?”

Tsuna exploded out of the rubble in Dying Will Mode.

“Tsuna!” Renato called. “Xanxus is not an opponent you can fight halfheartedly. If you’re thinking about saving your guardians first, you’re going to die. Believe in them, and fight the fight right in front of you.”
“I know,” Tsuna said calmly. “I’m going to put this guy away first.”

One of the Cervello ran off, calling to the viewers to follow quickly, and led them to one of the screens they had set up. “As with the guardian battles, do not step out of the boundary of the infrared sensors.”

He and Renato walked slightly away from the others. “It’s only my respect for Nono that’s stopping me from killing half the people here,” he muttered.

“I know, tesoro, I know. I’m raging inside. We’re just going to have to trust in them, that the kids can get those rings and save themselves, and each other, while the kitten takes on Big Bad. I can see why Nono never considered the brat. I don’t see how he’s a Sky with that attitude. He must be discordant.”

“Except that they all seem to look up to him, so there’s something else going on here, some other damn plan. He must have them woven six deep.”

“So you think he’s going to try to actually claim the ring, regardless of whether or not he actually wins it?”

He shrugged. “Makes sense. If you’re a raging psychopath, anyway. I really have to wonder just what Nono didn’t tell us along the way to explain how messed up the brat is.”

“Oh look, Xanxus was forced to bring out weapons,” Renato commented. “That’s gotta be a blow to his ego.”

“Same as Settimo? …Yes, I can see him imbuing them with flames. Great. And he can use them as propulsion. Even better.”

“Well, that’s one way to use them. Taking down the Storm and Lighting poles such that the rings land next to his men…”

He sighed and clenched his fists in his pockets. “Hibari-kun is something else,” he commented as the teen managed to not only fight the paralysis and get up, but strike down the Cloud pole and cure himself.

“I’m going to turn you into beef patties!” Levi could be heard yelling. The screen set aside for the guardians was split seven ways, so seeing the finer details of those encounters was impossible. Hayato showing up to throw dynamite to distract Levi from Lambo simply muddled the view further. He then showed just how much he’d learned by detonating all of Levi’s parabolas, then sending out more to blow Levi away. Hayato endeared himself to Hisui again when he rushed over to Lambo to make sure the cow was all right, and to insert the Lightning Ring into Lambo’s wristband and cure him.

“I need to make him a special dinner,” he said softly.

“Well, shit,” Renato said a minute later. “There goes the vest. Still, considering what it was blasted away by…”

“And there he goes. Huh. Maybe you saying Xanxus was on ice years ago was more true than we knew. He looks both scared and pissed right now. I can’t think of any other reason why he’d react like that to the Zero Point Breakthrough technique. Even recognize it.”

“I think you may be right,” Renato replied slowly.
“It’s the end, scum! I’m going to shoot you until you turn to ashes!” Xanxus promised.

“Then make sure you aim well,” Tsuna replied calmly.

“What?”

“Next time, I’m going to do it right.”

“Blood of Vongola,” Renato whispered. “Tsuna’s hyper intuition seems to have found a path.”

“Zero Point Breakthrough: Revised,” Tsuna said. Even though he kept getting hit and knocked around, Tsuna kept that resolve. It was driving Xanxus mad, into even more of a furious state than before.

“Oh, wow, he’s not just absorbing Xanxus’s flames, he’s transforming them.”

“Is it just me, or does Xanxus suddenly have scars that weren’t there before?” he murmured.

“Maybe he wears makeup to hide them normally? Those don’t look new, after all.”

His net alerted him to people coming up from behind, so he glanced over his shoulder. Dino was there, with several of his men, and a wheelchair-bound Squalo, who was wrapped in innumerable bandages.

“Impossible!” Basil said. “I don’t believe it, you’re still alive!?”

“On the day of the Rain Battle I had my men sneak into the basement,” Dino explained. “They were there to rescue Yamamoto if necessary. But the one who fell into the water tank was Squalo. We barely got to him in time—he was already on the verge of death—but somehow we managed to get him to skilled doctors at a hospital with advanced facilities, where he underwent major surgery.”

“So that’s why Dino-sama didn’t come to the Mist Battle!?” Basil said.

“Because I’m sure we can force some information out of this guy,” Dino said coldly.

A Cervello landed just outside the viewing box. “You’re Squalo!”

“Hey, little lady,” Shamal said with a leer. “It’s rather impossible for this guy to enter the field now, isn’t it?”

“I understand,” she replied. “Accepted. But all of you must enter the observation box.”

Dino, Squalo, Romario, and Ivan were allowed through the sensor net before it was reset and the Cervello jumped away. Just then the battle between Tsuna and Xanxus heated up again, with Xanxus becoming even more unhinged. An explosion occurred, smoke wreathing out like fattened smoke rings from a cigar.

From that smoke came Xanxus, causing mass panic—except from Squalo.

“Tch. Look at his hands,” he called to the others.

“They’re frozen!?” Colonnello said.

Squalo flipped.

“It froze Xanxus’s flame,” Renato said loudly enough for the viewers to hear. “It’s a technique
created to seal off Dying Will Flame.”

“Why!? It’s impossible!” Xanxus raged. “How could trash like you master the Vongola’s ultimate technique!?”

“Those scars… They’re proof that you were once consumed by the Zero Point Breakthrough over your entire body,” Tsuna said.

“All right, then,” Renato said briskly, but softly. “Nono didn’t simply imprison the brat, he froze him. Right. What the hell?”

More shouting, cursing, and Tsuna rushed in to freeze Xanxus entirely, and in the process he completed the Sky Ring.

Squalo was induced to say at least a little of what he knew, but then he yelled for the Cervello. “Vooi! Let me outta here!”

“We cannot allow that. According to the regulations, the conditions for victory have not yet been met.”

“Screw you! Let me out!”

Tsuna went down on one knee, breathing heavily.

That was when the Varia struck, though what went to kill Tsuna was illusion, which he ignored.

“You saw through that very well,” Mammon said, “but it looks like you don’t have the energy to crawl, even.”

“It’s useless,” Tsuna replied from his sprawl. “Xanxus has been put to sleep.”

“Let’s see about that, shall we? Instead, shall we say that preparations are in good order for the ceremony that will declare our boss the successor to the Vongola leadership. Our boss will once again be revived.” Mammon was holding the six guardians’ rings. “Do you know why the rings were stored in halves? And do you know why they can only be awarded to the true successor of the Vongola? Because the rings themselves have a hidden power.

“Our boss was locked up after being frozen by the ninth’s Zero Point Breakthrough. When the ice was melted, there were seven burn marks left on the base. I cannot be sure who’d done it, but the evidence was enough to lead me to a hypothesis.” Mammon did … something; the rings flamed.

“Exactly as I thought. You better watch this.”

“Mio Dio,” Renato muttered. “All Tsuna’s resolve, and Mammon can negate the results in seconds.”

“When the full set of Vongola rings are passed to the successor, it’s said that the rings will grant a great power to the new blood of Vongola.”

“To the blood of Vongola…?” Tsuna said as he started to get up.

“It’s about time you returned it,” Belphegor said saucily, and snatched the Sky Ring away. “This ring belongs to the true successor.” The Varia then proceeded to de-ice Xanxus. “Welcome back, boss. It’s time.”

Xanxus looked up from his prone position. “Give me … the rings.”

Belphegor began to slide the Sky Ring onto Xanxus’s finger. “Looks like everyone and their dog is
here to witness the birth of the new boss.”

“O, pride of the Vongola,” Mammon intoned, “grant your successor, grant the young blood of the Vongola, your great power!”

Xanxus stood up and raised that hand to the sky. “This is it. This is the power! This limitless power is overflowing through me! This is the proof of the successor to the Vongola! Finally! Finally! It’s mine! With this, I will become the Vongola Decimo!”

And then blood erupted from Xanxus and he jerked as if struck, then collapsed.

“The ring has … rejected … Xanxus’s blood,” Tsuna said.

“What do you know!?” Mammon demanded. “What do you mean, the rings have rejected his blood!?”

“I certainly had it coming, didn’t I?” Xanxus said roughly as he struggled to stand and failed. “That old fart and I have no blood relation whatsoever!”

Squalo spoke again, revealing the truth behind Xanxus’s life, his delusional mother, and how Xanxus grew up unchallenged in the role of Nono’s son. But then he’d found proof he was not Vongola, that he was adopted, though Squalo had only learned the details after Xanxus had been put on ice.

“And that led to the Cradle Affair,” Renato said.

“You betrayed the ninth,” Tsuna said, “yet he didn’t kill you. Even till the end, hadn’t he always treated you with acceptance? He didn’t care about bloodlines or the law. He believed in you more than anyone else, and treated you as his own son.”

“Don’t make me sick with that unconditional love crap!” Xanxus shouted. “What use is that shit!? The only thing I wanted was the seat of the boss! I only wanted those scumbags to worship me! I only wanted them to praise me!”

“Sounds like the mother wasn’t the only one mentally ill,” he muttered.

Xanxus coughed up more blood as he ripped the ring off his finger and dropped it.

“Xanxus-sama! We will need to deliberate further on whether or not you are suitable for the rings,” a Cervello said.


“S-shut up! If I can’t have them, nobody can! Kill them! Kill them all!”

“Xanxus-sama!”

“I approve! Way to go, boss!” Belphegor said enthusiastically.

“We’re back to our original plan,” Mammon added.

“How rotten can you get?” Hayato snarled. “As if we’d let you!”

“And I was so hoping he’d just give it up,” he muttered, “and we could take them home.”

Mammon let it be known that the Varia squads were on their way to help. “They were already on
their way here because after our boss’s victory, they were supposed to kill the rest of the people here and settle everything. These are our elite, next in battle ability only to us, the core members.”

“Wait a minute!” a Cervello objected. “We cannot allow any outsiders to interfere!”

She was struck down a second later by Belphegor.

“Hey, maggots! Since they’ve shown their true intentions, we’ll join the battle on Tsuna’s side! Let us out of here!”

Dino, Shamal, and Basil all shouted their agreement.

“Understood. In that case, the Varia has been disqualified,” the Cervello said, and clicked a control in her hand. “The infrared boundary on the observation box will be disabled.”

“Let’s go!” Colonnello said.

“Wait!” Renato said sharply. He had Leon handy, worn as a set of goggles. “It hasn’t been deactivated.”

“How naïve,” Mammon taunted. “We sabotaged it earlier. We arranged it so all of you would die in that same cell.”

“Move aside,” Colonnello ordered, bringing his gun around. “I’ll blow this apart!”

“It’s useless,” the Cervello yelled. “It’s constructed to implode if you fire from inside!”

While the other guardians were babbling, Chrome raised a hand to her ear and cocked her head to one side. “Eh…? Someone is … coming?”

Three newcomers landed in the field. “Reporting, sir!” one said. “We’re the only ones left. The Varia squad has been wiped out! That guy—he’s too strong! The man’s like a demon. He’ll be here soon —!”

A prodigious sphere came out of nowhere and nailed the three underlings.

“Lancia?” Renato murmured.

“That’s the person,” Chrome said, “Mukuro-sama’s been talking to all this time…”

“Don’t be mistaken, Vongola,” Lancia said. “I didn’t come here to help you. I came here to say thank you.”

Hayato sprinted over to Tsuna to protect him as the other guardians, plus Lancia, got ready to brawl. The Varia backed down, and Xanxus screamed abuse at them. A Cervello knelt at Xanxus’s head and said, “Xanxus-sama. Since you have been disqualified, you must forfeit the Vongola rings.”

“Cer-vello… It’s gone … according to … your wishes… You were … right… Are you … happy now?”

“You say that, but we do not have wishes nor do we predict anything. Everything was already decided. Your role in this is over. Thank you for doing your part. With this, the ring contest battle has ended. We will now announce the overall result. Since Xanxus-sama has been disqualified, the winner of the Sky Battle is Sawada Tsunayoshi. Therefore, the next successor to the Vongola is Sawada Tsunayoshi-sama and his six guardians.”
Hisui shuffled sideways and whispered into Renato’s ear, “You willing to risk teleporting out?”

After a slight pause his lover nodded, so he quietly took Renato’s arm and apparated them outside the enclosure, then reached out and brought Lambo to him. “I’ll meet you at home,” he said, then apparated again. He turned on the bedside lamp to the lowest setting, set Lambo down on his bed, and tossed a diagnostic spell at him; the chibi seemed to be fine. A quick trip to the potions cupboard later and he had a general healing potion down the child’s throat, and he sat there, leaning against the headboard with Lambo in his lap, infusing the boy with his magic in order to make the potion work.

Renato arrived two hours later, looking exhausted. “How’s he doing?”

“I used a potion on him,” he said softly and yawned. “It’s just about run its course.”

Renato nodded and started stripping down to his boxers. His clothes went into an untidy pile, and then he went into the bathroom. He brushed his teeth, used the facilities, and came back into the bedroom to slip under the sheet and prop himself against the headboard. “Well. Tsuna is safely at home in bed, and I shadowed Hayato to his apartment. He’s tucked away safely, as well. Chrome went off with Kakimoto and Jōshima. Lancia is at Nana’s; Tsuna offered him a place to sleep for the night. I was thinking…”

“Yes?”

“I want to take the kids away for a bit, but they don’t actually have a real break for some time. Maybe a weekend? Haul them off on a Friday…”

“Perhaps. But maybe it’ll be just as well for things to return to a normal routine first for a bit. Let’s arrange a night out so they can celebrate, get Tsuna caught up on the school work he missed, and then plan for a trip. Maybe we can go to that Disney park in Tokyo you mentioned forever ago.”

Renato hummed. “Not a bad thought. We never did get around to going. It shouldn’t be too much of a bother even with that many people. The only one likely to be troublesome is Lambo, but with you there I expect he’d behave.”

“He knows better,” he said sleepily, then cocked his head to the side. “That’s done, then.” He carefully shifted Lambo to the spot between them and got up so he could strip down and hit the bathroom for at least the basics. He was back and in bed a couple of minutes later, leaning sideways so he could kiss his lover before shifting down and pulling Lambo to him.

“Don’t squish the little guy,” Renato joked.

He snorted softly and closed his eyes, not caring about the light. When he woke up he was facing the edge of the bed with Lambo tucked in against him, and Renato was spooned against his back. Bright sunlight was leaking in around the curtains and the angle of the light told him it might well be noon. A quick spell confirmed it. As he went to get up Lambo also awoke, yawning expansively.

He turned the boy around and held him up, and was amused to see Lambo’s eyes go wide. “Nagi-san?”

“Yes. How are you feeling?” he asked, standing up and shifting the kid to a proper hold. He wandered into the bathroom and set Lambo on the counter.

“Ano… Lambo-san is a little tired, but…”

“Any pain? Headache?”
Lambo shook his head.

“Okay. Time for a shower, then.” He got Lambo out of his outfit—and he was still wondering why the Cervello had put him back in the cow onesie when Lussuria had still been in a hospital gown—and onto the floor, then removed his boxers and tossed them aside to be dealt with later. While he was making sure Lambo was seen to he flicked a hand back to throw a cleaning spell at the onesie before finishing up.

Lambo was patted down with a towel, his hair sighed at, and redressed, and his horns put in place.

“You can brush your teeth when we get you to Mama’s.”

Lambo wrinkled his nose, but nodded. One of the first things he had done when taking the child on as a student was insist on certain things. The first time he’d heard the boy brag about never brushing his teeth, well… He set the kid on the counter again and said, “Sit tight. We’ll get breakfast shortly.”

He tidied up, making sure pockets were empty, and tossed all the clothing into the hamper, then hauled the boy off to the kitchen and parked him at his usual seat. Renato joined them right about the time the food was ready. The meal was punctuated by yawning more than conversation, and he kept a close eye on the boy in case he did something like start to doze off.

“You told him yet?” Renato asked quietly.

Lambo paused mid-chew, obviously wondering if they were talking about him.

Hisui shook his head, then focused on the boy. “Chibi… Ren-kun gave me a gift the other day, custody papers for you. You can still live at Mama’s if you want, but I’m your legal guardian now.”

Lambo’s hashi clattered to the table as his eyes went impossibly wide. He started to say something, then paused and furiously chewed his mouthful and swallowed. “Lambo-san has a daddy?”

He blinked, not having expected that response. “Ano…”

“Yes,” Renato said. “Nagi-san is your daddy now.”

Hisui floated the hashi over to the sink and materialized a set for the boy and offered them. Lambo accepted them and set them on the rest, then burst into tears.

“Oh hell,” he muttered, then got up so he could snatch the boy into his arms to cuddle him. “You better be crying because you’re happy, chibi.” A noise of agreement wafted up, the sound muffled by his chest. Once the crying tapered off to snuffles he took Lambo into the nearest bathroom to get him to blow his nose, then parked him in his seat again. “Don’t let good food go to waste.”

Lambo sniffled and nodded, and started eating again.

When they got to Nana’s the first thing he did was hustle the boy into the bathroom and make sure Lambo brushed his teeth. “All right,” he said, once the child was done, “you start thinking about what sort of dinner you’d like. I did say I’d make your favorites. Not tonight, but perhaps tomorrow.”

Lambo nodded and set his toothbrush in its holder, then held his arms up. Hisui obligingly picked him up and carried him off to see Nana and then tuck him into a bed for a nap because he was yawning again already. Tsuna was sleeping like the dead still, which was fine. Hyper Dying Will Mode was a bit brutal, though in terms of muscle pain the kitten had it a lot better what with all the physical training.
Renato was off arranging for everyone to gather that evening at Takesushi. It’d be on them, the cost of all that magnificent sushi. Lambo was wide awake an hour later and off playing with Fūta and I-Pin—and Lancia, too, surprisingly. They were using the poor guy like a jungle gym. Lambo went down for another nap after he wore himself out, but by the time he woke up again and got back to playing Tsuna finally emerged and wandered into the living room, still dressed in pajamas.

“Thank you for letting me stay,” Lancia said to Tsuna from his position on the floor.

Tsuna squeaked in surprise. “Thank you very much for yesterday,” he replied. “Wait, why are you —?”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Lancia interrupted.

Nana popped her head into the room and said, “Tsuna-kun, you should go and change. We’re all going out.”

“Oh? Where are we going?”

“A party,” Renato said.

When Tsuna just looked confused Nana said, “Have you already forgotten what happened yesterday? Isn’t it worth celebrating?”

Tsuna was too tired still to do a proper freak-out.

“Lambo-kun was released from the hospital, right?” Nana continued.

“…Right!” Tsuna said, finally seeing the cow scrambling around on Lancia.

“We’re gathering at Takesushi,” he said. “Go get dressed.”

The only two people who did not show up were Hibari and Chrome, but that was not unexpected. Hisui had been divided on whether or not Chrome would join in, but she had simply accepted her ring and wandered off without saying either way. Kyoko’s friend Hana was present for some reason, and Colonnello had decided to join in.

Hayato charged up to Tsuna once Nana was far enough away and leaned in to whisper, “Although it looks like we’re celebrating the stupid cow coming home, there’s no doubt today is a victory celebration for the scramble battles. We really did it!” Hayato brought his hand up to show off the ring he was wearing, and a nearby Ryohei and Takeshi lifted up chains around their necks on which their rings were threaded.

As Renato was giving Tsuna the Sky Ring, Hisui pulled Hayato off to the side. “Thank you.”

The boy blinked at him in confusion.

“For Lambo-kun. I know you don’t especially like him, but I saw you go to his rescue. If you’re interested, I had planned to make you a special dinner of your favorites.”

Hayato blinked again, but considering he had no idea of the changed relationship, that was not unexpected. “Uh…”

“Nagi-san!” Lambo called, then scampered over to scramble up into Hisui’s arms. He saw Hayato and beamed. “Lambo-san has a daddy now!” he crowed, then gave Hisui a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“Oh,” Hayato breathed out, his eyes going wide.
“So, you let me know if you’re interested,” he said, “and what you’d like. And for how many. All right?”

“Right,” Hayato said slowly, “I’ll get back to you on that.”

He nodded and wandered off toward the food. “What kind of sushi would you like, Lambo-kun?”

“Wait!” Tsuna called, racing down the street. “Hey, wait up, you guys!”


“Vongola,” Lancia greeted.

“Why are you going back to Italy without saying anything?” Tsuna asked.

“My apologies. I was suddenly summoned and I believed everyone to be busy,” Basil replied.

“As for me,” Lancia answered, “I’m not one to bother people, so I was trying to just go quietly.”

Tsuna blinked. “Ano… Where is your weapon?”

Lancia smirked faintly. “I’d get a lot of questions if I tried traveling with it on the plane, so I’m leaving it to a courier.”

“Lancia, I heard from Chrome that it was Mukuro who asked you to come?” Renato said.

“No, not exactly. I haven’t been in touch with Mukuro since that time. But, the day before the battle for the Sky Ring, I had a strange feeling. It’s likely because of the amount of time I spent under his control that I could sense his thoughts. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Lancia-san…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lancia told Tsuna. “I may not want to forgive Mukuro, but being able to help you as a result of that connection was enough for me.”

“Do you … still wish to pay a visit to the deceased family members?” Basil asked.

“Yeah. I only have one lifetime in which to repent for making that incident possible.” He paused a moment, looking down, then removed a ring from his finger. “Oh, right,” he said, holding up the ring for Tsuna to see. “This is my boss’s treasure. Though it’s not as good as a Vongola ring. I want you to have it.”

“Such … an important item!?”

Lancia pressed it into Tsuna’s hand. “I want you to have it,” he repeated. “You gave me back control of my mind.”

Basil reached into his pocket and pulled out a small container, which he offered to Tsuna. “This is from me! I do not know if it suits Sawada-dono, but nevertheless, should you find yourself in an emergency, please use it. Well, farewell.”

The two of them turned and continued on down the street.

“Are those what I think they are?” he asked, eyeing the container.
“Dying Will pills?” Tsuna said, looking at it with trepidation. “But why?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Renato said mockingly, “maybe because we aren’t with you twenty-four-seven and you might actually need them? Perhaps when the next assassin trying to kill you shows up and you might prefer that over being shot?”

“Next assassin!?”

He rolled his eyes. “Guess what, kitten? It’s time to play catch up on all the school work you missed!”

He was out on a job when that feeling came back. Ants started crawling up his spine, urging him to get back to Namimori. Of course, he was in the middle of a job. He had spent the last few hours floating through the ventilation system to make his way deeper into a ridiculously large compound outside Sapporo to get to his target, and to leave right then would make a mockery of the effort already expended. He kept going for another ten minutes, then cast another locater and exhaled a silent sigh of relief; his target was in the room below him.

Why the ducts were not trapped in any way was beyond his comprehension, but he was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. A look through the screening into the room below showed his target seated at a desk, going over some paperwork. He materialized the usual senbon and struck; the moment he was certain of the kill he disapparated to a spot he had chosen outside.

By the time he arrived home he was greeted by a strangely older Renato, who said, “This is bad.”

His brow went up questioningly.

“I’ve been here for a while now, way longer than five minutes.”

“Great. I suppose this could be like when Giannini tinkered with the Ten Year Bazooka and Hayato was stuck in chibi form for a week?”

Renato stared at him, brow furrowed. “I am seriously wrestling with my conscience at the moment.”

His brow went up again as he eyed his strangely older lover. “I would almost feel like I was cheating.”

Renato leered at him. “Yeah, no. Believe me, tesoro, we’re still going strong, and I’d love you at any age. But that’s not what I meant. Ten years from now is…” He sighed and shook his head.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

Renato shook his head. “Not just yet, but soon probably. Let me think.” He eyed him, his brow crinkled. “Trying to remember… You just got back from a job, right?”

The wards would not have let anyone in who intended harm, but better safe than sorry. “How did you originally track me down?”

Renato blinked at him. “My insects, then Leon.”

“Where did you get Leon?”

“Which one?” Renato replied. “If you mean the one present now, we got him in Berlin, at the
enclave there, as a result of that fellow’s accident.” He moved in close enough to whisper in Hisui’s ear, “And your original name was Harry Potter. Your parents bled out on the scene at Malfoy Manor.”

He nodded. “Just checking.”

The response to that was his lover nibbling on his earlobe. “Now that you mention it,” he purred, “I am kind of hungry. Things are a bit … hectic … on the other side. We don’t always have a decent stretch of time to indulge ourselves.” Hands started sliding up Hisui’s back.

‘Oh, what the hell,’ he thought, and allowed himself to be swept away.

Over dinner he said, “Well, someone still has to keep an eye on the kitten.”

Renato paused mid-chew, nodded, and continued. “It’d probably be best if that was you. If I poofed back in the middle of things…”

“Yeah.” So the next morning he shadowed the kitten around while he spent time with his friends. Lambo was at Nana’s for the time being, so he was not particularly worried about the child. What he was not expecting, after Tsuna went home looking a bit worried, was for the two of them to get into a tussle and for Tsuna to be shot with the Ten Year Bazooka.

The twenty-five year old Tsuna had a worried and regretful look on his face. He looked back at the door to the room and frowned, then turned his head sharply to look at the tree Hisui was blending into. Tsuna leaped out the window and landed gracefully on the lawn, so Hisui dropped down to stare at him openly.

“Can we go to your house?” Tsuna asked quietly. “Lambo-kun looked like he was half asleep again already.”

He sighed. “Why do I get the feeling you’re going to be—yes, let’s go.”

Tsuna offered his arm, which caused his brow to go up, but he did a quick sweep to make sure no one was positioned to witness anything, then apparated them.

Renato wandered out at the sound and eyed the older Tsuna, then sighed. “What are the odds?”

Hisui looked between them, frowned, and said, “I’m just going to let you two talk. Any suggestions for dinner?” They both shrugged, so he headed off to go read for a while first. That the older Tsuna was still there meant it was likely he would be sticking around for far too long, and that something hinky was going on in the future.

The doorbell went a bit later so he went to answer it, expecting that Renato and Tsuna would be avoiding everyone else. An older Hayato was there. Hisui rolled his eyes and ushered him in. “What the hell is going on?” he muttered, then cast a quick locater and led Hayato off to join the other two in Renato’s armory. He did his best to ignore how Hayato flipped the fuck out on seeing Tsuna and just walked away.

As soon as the door was closed Hayato started in, but Tsuna let him get it all out. Finally, into the ensuing silence broken only by harsh breathing, he said, “It’s all part of the plan.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Hayato demanded.
“We weren’t even supposed to show up here,” Tsuna said as Renato continued to clean one of his guns. “Shoichi assured me we’d be in suspended animation while our younger counterparts took on the challenge. For them to get stronger then. Our counterparts leading our younger selves in stages. With that kind of threat facing them they’ll be forced to get stronger rapidly.”

“Who knew!?”

Tsuna shrugged. “Me, obviously. Ren-oji, Nagi-oji, and Hibari-san.” He chuckled softly. “I just know Hibari-san is going to be brutal on me, but it’s necessary. The question is how long before the others get switched. And frankly, I still don’t know if Nagi-san will be. Not sure it would matter. He hasn’t changed much, really, in all this time. He’s still just as deadly, he’s still the same rock of sanity.”

“The only reason I was switched,” he said, “was so that Hisui’s intuition would go crazy and alert him to something happening. You think I enjoyed the idea of sending my lover into a panic over my disappearance, even with his permission?”

Hayato slumped a little. “No. I just don’t get why you faked your death, boss.”

“Because you’d have acted differently,” Tsuna said simply. “Hibari-san would never let on. Neither would Nagi-oji. Ryohei-kun was sent on a mission to keep him out of the loop while still doing something we needed done. Hayato… I trusted you to be you.”

Hayato sighed and nodded. “But then why can’t we just kill the bastards now!?”

He rolled his eyes. “Hayato, try thinking about that for a moment. C’mon, kid, you’re smart.”

Hayato frowned and started pacing the room, mumbling to himself. Ten minutes later he sighed again and said, “Paradox.”

“Right. I know it’s hard, but you just have to endure,” he said. “We should have been in suspended animation and unable to have these moments to flip out and think too much and whatever else. But something went wrong and we’re here. So let’s just stay put, have some faith in our younger selves, and try to ease things for Hisui. He’s got to be feeling pretty frustrated right now, and will be even more so when more people get switched. Don’t be surprised if he gets openly cranky.”

Tsuna blinked at him. “Is that actually possible for him?”

He laughed. “Did I ever tell you about the time he managed a breakthrough and manifested his ability with fire?”

He was going to have to prepare food for more people than normal, so he made a quick trip to the store and began working. Hopefully no other misplaced persons would show up—that evening, anyway. As he was not in the mood for anything involved, he simply made something American for dinner: cheeseburgers and fries. If none of them liked it, they could cook for themselves, or order in. ‘Kami-sama,’ he thought, ‘apparently I’m kind of pissed off if I’m thinking shit like that.’

He reached out and popped the door of the armory as a hint and a few minutes later Renato, Hayato, and Tsuna all filed in and took seats. He slid plates onto the table along with condiments and extras, and took a seat as well. Half way through the meal he looked at Tsuna and said, “I’m going to have to go tinker with Nana-chan.”

Tsuna winced and nodded, which told him that at some point he had opened up about his abilities.
“Yes. I don’t want her to worry. We’re going to have to do something about school, as well.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “Any idea how long you’ll be here like this?”

Renato snorted. “Not a damn clue.”

“I’ll try to take the Ten Year Bazooka from Lambo, but…”

“But you don’t want to get switched out yourself,” Hayato said.

He nodded. “Still, if there’s something wrong with it, I have to try. Assuming you haven’t already thought of, depending on how long you’ll be here, we may need to hit another town and buy clothing. Ren-kun’s should fit just fine, but you two…”

“The people here are a tad on the oblivious side,” Renato said, “but I tend to think they’d find it strange that older versions of ourselves were wandering town. So yes. But I’d prefer that you be the one driving, or we take public transport. Actually, none of our cards are going to work.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ve got more than enough, you know that. We’ll just use one of mine. I’ll do some meddling tonight, then take care of the school tomorrow morning. After that we can see about getting Hayato-kun and Tsuna-kun outfitted for a stay of indeterminate length.”

“Thank you, Nagi-oji,” Tsuna said.

He blinked. “You, too?”

Tsuna blushed. “It kind of caught on.”

Hayato tossed a smirk his way.

“Well, since I can’t ask any of the questions I’d like to, let’s talk about languages. How many have you picked up?”

Tsuna shooed him away from cleaning up and said he would take care of it, so he skulked off to go set some compulsions in his best friend’s head. Lambo was sleeping peacefully and the Ten Year Bazooka was nowhere to be seen, so he held off on that, not wanting to disturb his—‘I guess if he thinks I’m his daddy, then he’s my son now.’ He shook his head and returned to the house.

The next morning he did some meddling with school officials’ brains, then apparated everyone to Kyoto to do some shopping. After all, if they already knew, why bother with a long drive? Renato sneered slightly over off-the-rack clothing, but none of it was for him, so the others simply ignored him. By the time they returned to Namimori and the house, Hisui was displeased to see older versions of Takeshi, Lambo, I-Pin, Kyoko, and Haru cluttering up his living room.

“What the hell?” he muttered. “Ren, find them all rooms, please? I’ve decided to have a minor breakdown and feel the need to retreat,” he said, and took off for his library.

Lambo followed him in and sat next to him on the loveseat. “In case the younger me doesn’t think to tell you, I want you to know you’re a fantastic father.” He leaned over and planted a soft kiss on Hisui’s cheek, then wormed his way under an arm.

He sighed. “I’m glad to hear that. I’m a bit confused at the moment, though.”

“We all are. If this keeps up we’re going to have a full house.”

Hisui snorted. “A full house of people I have to hide, and who can’t really talk to me. I actually feel
depressed. I don’t think I’ve ever felt depressed in my life until this moment.” He could see Lambo frown in his peripheral vision.

“You taught me how to cook,” Lambo offered.

“Oh? Did I do a good job?”

“Of course you did. You don’t really think—tell you what. How about I help with that while we’re here? You were always the one doing the cooking until I expressed an interest. There’s no reason you should be cooking for so many unexpected people all the time.”

He had to think about that, the idea of letting someone else mess with his kitchen, but eventually he nodded. “How much … do you know? About me?”

“…Oh. Oh, that. I know about your … other powers. After Tsuna took over and he went through some of the documentation… Well, the Vongola Nono had several things sealed away where no one but the next boss could get to it. But you told me directly.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that aside from irritated,” he replied quietly. “I only ever admitted to it because I felt I had to. I can’t say that I’m pleased Nono kept records, though I can understand him wanting some kind of advantage.”

“He apparently felt that the next boss should be aware of that world. Tsuna connected the dots, so to speak, because of the times you’d transport him and Hayato to that mountain. It’s just us three. Tsuna didn’t think he had any right to tell the others. Hayato’s his right hand man, so…”

“Fine. Let’s go see what we have in the kitchen for supplies and start planning, then.”

Lambo detached himself and stood up, waited for his father, and started walking. “Kyoko and Haru can also cook, you know. Unfortunately, you’re the only one who can go out without much suspicion right now. Maybe me and I-Pin, too.”

“I really don’t like the idea of a bunch of people messing around in my kitchen,” he said stubbornly.

Lambo brought up his hands in a surrender position. “All right. Just you and me, then. But they can always help with planning ideas?”

“Fine.” As they walked by the living room he looked at the crowd briefly, but kept going.

“He really hasn’t changed, has he?” Haru whispered too loudly.

Renato jumped up to follow them and slid into the kitchen. “You taught Lambo really well, tesoro,” he said gaily. “He’s almost as good a cook as you are.”

He stared at his lover, unhappy that a smile peeked out briefly. “Should I take that to mean you two resolved your differences along the way?”

Lambo grinned. “Eh, I still try to kill him every so often. For old time’s sake.”

Renato snorted in amusement. “I don’t think paint-ball tournaments count.”

Another smile peeked out before it was quashed.

“Of course they do!” Lambo declared. “It’s beside the point that nobody dies.”

“Does this mean you learned to shoot something other than a missile launcher, then?”
Lambo actually pouted. “Ren refused to let me modify one, so yes. I learned how to use a proper gun.”

A real smile appeared. “I see. Well, there are nine people to be fed for who knows how long. So, time to go shopping. Lambo, you and I-Pin-chan can come along. You two have changed the most. Everyone else will just have to watch television or something.”

Renato nodded, getting the underlying meaning.

He set off, slow enough that Lambo could hasten over to I-Pin and get her moving, then headed for the shops. They were just coming out when he spotted Ryohei and paused. “You two, take the long way,” he said quietly. As soon as they were off he set out.

Ryohei spotted him and dashed over, started yelling in his general direction.

“I’m not deaf, you know,” he said flatly. “But I will be if you keep doing that.”

“Eh?”

Hisui started to walk away.

Ryohei followed after a moment of surprise and started yelling again.

“Maybe some time in the future you’ll learn how to speak normally. Until that point I’m afraid I can’t be bothered to even try listening.”

“But—!”

He shook his head and kept on walking. “No. Learn some control. Your life might be ‘extreme’, but that’s no excuse for being impolite. And if you keep it up, I’ll give you a very painful reason to yell. Impoliteness ranks right up there for my motivation to hurt someone, so go figure out how to use an indoor voice.”

“We’re outdoors!”

He shook his head again and wandered into Takesushi long enough for Ryohei to get distracted by Tsuyoshi and back out again, at which point he sped off home and unloaded his groceries, then started planning dinner.

“How’d you ditch him?” Lambo asked.

“I complained about the volume of his voice to confuse him, then ducked into Takesushi to shake him off. I’ll just buy groceries elsewhere, I guess.”

“Well, if this keeps on, we’re missing Chrome and Hibari, but I doubt either of them would come here,” Renato said. “Well, and Ryohei, of course.”

“Please tell me he learns to moderate his voice in the future.”

Renato scratched the back of his neck. “Sort of?”

He sighed. “What are we supposed to tell Nono? Assuming he’s even in any condition to get reports.”

“Uh, shit,” Renato replied. “We lie like dogs.”
The next few weeks were spent reading, watching television, playing group games, and sparring out back. Hibari was spotted briefly in town, but disappeared. Then Ryohei showed up at his door and was let in. “Have you figured out how to use an indoor voice yet?”

Ryohei smiled sheepishly at him as he closed the door. “Some of the time? But when I get excited…”

“Kami-sama,” he muttered. “The others are here. I will hurt you if you start yelling.”

Ryohei nodded and toed off his shoes. “I’ll try to the extreme.”

That he said it at a normal tone of voice was heartening. Two days after that Basil appeared at his door and was ushered in. “Please tell me this is the last of you,” he muttered. “Ren!”

Renato came into the hallway and eyed the new arrival. “Weren’t you in Spain?”

“Yes. I checked on a few things first, then came here. It would not do for—well, anyway.”

He was watching television with the others when his mind was inundated with memories of part of a future that technically never happened. As the ground beneath and around the house shook everyone in the room suddenly was replaced with their proper counterparts. Renato immediately pulled him closer and gave him a worried look.

It took a few minutes of hard concentration to shift memories into their proper places as they were shoved into his head, but eventually he was able to sit up straight and frown. He sent a faint glare at Tsuna, who squeaked in alarm.

“W-what?”

“First, good job on getting stronger. That applies to all of you. But—”

Tsuna cringed.

“I am going to run you into the ground, kitten. I am so annoyed with you right now. Actually, I’m annoyed with most of you. No reason to focus on just the leader, after all.”

“But—”

“The only ones I’m not upset with are the girls and Hibari-kun, in fact.”

“But—”

“Now that you’ve all returned, you have been released from the hospital.”

Renato raised a brow.

“There was a bus accident,” he said. “You were all being treated at Dino’s facility—so far as anyone knows, anyway. I had to get creative with the excuses considering just how many of you were involved. So, second… Break just started, so you’ll all have two weeks to get caught up on what you missed in school. You boys will be coming here every day. Haru-chan, Kyoko-chan, you can come if you like, but it’s not required. I know you two are decent students. But if you want some supervision, you’re welcome to be here. I’ve collected the assignments once a week so I know what you all need to work on.”
“I … don’t even go to the same school,” Haru said softly.

“I am aware of that,” he replied evenly. “Don’t be too surprised if your families seem oblivious to you having been gone, and don’t expect any of them to be springing holiday trips on you, either. Be here, Monday morning, nine o’clock. If you aren’t, I will come find you and drag you here.”

All but the cow ran off. Lambo scampered over and onto the loveseat, so Hisui snatched him up for a cuddle. “I’m happy you’re home safe, chibi. You did very well.”

“Nagi~san already told Lambo-san that,” Lambo said with a giggle.

“It bears repeating,” he replied. “Still unhappy that you’re a guardian at such a young age, but…”

“Is Nagi-san really upset with Lambo-san, too?” Lambo asked, aiming wide green eyes at him.

He shook his head. “No, you behaved yourself fairly well. And when you did end up in that fight, you did a good job. I’m more upset you had to be there at all, that you were in that kind of danger.”

“Lambo-san promises to work hard for Nagi~san!”

“All right, chibi. But for the next two weeks I’ll have you pick up where we left off. Do you remember what it was?”

“Ano…” A finger came up to press against Lambo’s lower lip. “German!”

“Correct. You can get back to work on that while the others are getting caught up on school.”

“O~kay!”

The video conference call connected and the two of them were shortly staring at Nono, who looked exhausted. But his eyes were fierce with resolve, so he could not have been doing too badly. “I have this feeling,” he said after greetings were made all around, “that something of grave import has happened.”

Renato snorted faintly and nodded. “You might say that. A great deal has occurred while you were recovering. We all, Hisui excepted, spent the majority of our time since the end of the succession battle, just shy of ten years in the future. I am sorry to say you were already … gone.”

“Do you know why?”

Renato hesitated. “It’s not a kind truth.”

Nono’s expression hardened. “Tell me.”

Renato sighed, then his chin jutted out slightly. “Well… I did not have full access to the details, but despite most Vongola installations being blown sky high, there were still reports available in the usual place that I was able to get to. From what I could gather from the reports there was some mild discord between you and your guardians due to how you’d been captured and used as you were. It made me think that your intuition might have warned you of something, something that caused you to prepare those Sky Flame-sealed documents ahead of time, for the battles, and left them with the Cervello.

“Things were never quite the same after that, but I confess I was reading between the lines of the
reports and have no solid basis of fact for that opinion. Not long after Tsuna took over, when he turned twenty, you were attacked and a bullet winged your heart. Your guardians were unable to prevent it. Your heart was already working too hard, and your issues with mobility made it almost impossible to avoid. You died from it.”

“I see.” Nono looked down in thought and did not speak for another few minutes. “Now, as to what happened during this trip to the future.”

Renato summarized what he had experienced, what the teens had learned, and the eventual outcome of the entire debacle. Indeed, Byakuran had already sent a cheerful message of greeting. There were apparently no hard feelings, and quite a lot of respect had been built up. Tsuna had mostly just accepted it in the way Skies tended to do, though his guardians were a bit more wary of the seeming peace.

Hisui could not blame them, but then, even being accepted as themselves by Tsuna, no matter how much he might get frustrated with them, they could not fully comprehend the average mindset of a Sky, that ability to forgive. Byakuran seemed to have learned his lesson; Hisui certainly was not getting any hinky feelings about it, anyway.

He was snapped back to full attention when Nono said, “I am hardly in good health now.”

Renato nodded.

“It would be in our best interests to hold the Inheritance Ceremony. Tsuna has proven himself. He would not have to take over straight away, but he should be confirmed in his position.”

“We'll let him know,” he said, “while also easing him back into a more normal life. As normal as it gets, that is.”

Nono nodded. “I will contact you with further details as they become available.” He ended the call.

He sighed. “That was uncomfortable. I don’t think he enjoyed the vague hints of criticism.”

His lover shrugged. “What else could be said? He wanted to know what I knew.”

He let it lie. He had no doubt that the source of part of Renato’s irritation was actually on Iemitsu’s head. The man had successfully protected Nana, so far as they knew, but to take her to Italy? To the same country as part of the fight? Eh, probably the south, but still… Just another reason to dislike or even loathe Iemitsu, even if he had not technically done it, because that future for them had been negated.

“You realize, of course, I truly despise these box weapon things.”

Renato smiled at him. “Why did I know you’d say that?”

“What the hell happened to elegance in our work? Now people are going to be sporting these horrid things. I commend Tsuna-kun for learning how to really make X-Burner effective, even if he does need those contacts to assist him, but…”

“I know, tesoro. But you know as well as I do that it was mafiosi who were too weak to fight the Vongola alliance who ended up making things more complicated. Things evolve, even if it goes in ways we find crude.”

He rolled his eyes and headed for the kitchen. “Do you think he was given memories of the battles anyway?”
Renato shrugged. “It’s possible. The Arcobaleno might have arranged it, just as they did for those who were there, but weren’t switched. Didn’t seem like the right time to ask. He may have asked simply to see how his matched with ours.”

He hummed in agreement and started deciding on what to make for dinner.
“W-what did you want to talk about?” Tsuna asked, perched as he was on the edge of the sofa.

Renato looked at Hisui and said, “Is he finally getting more perceptive, or is this a one-off?”

He shrugged. “Nono has sent word regarding the Vongola Inheritance Ceremony.”


Renato sighed. “It was a one-off. Mafiosi from around the world will be there.”

Tsuna freaked out, but he did so quietly for once.

“Nono knows everything about your fight with Byakuran,” he said. “He’s the one who decided you were ready.”

“Hey, wait a second,” Takeshi said, “I’m confused.”

He refrained from any overt signs of frustration. He would have preferred to broach the subject without any of the guardians, but it had not worked out that way.

“Inheritance ceremony?” Hayato said. “What does this mean?”

Renato made a slight sound of annoyance. “It will take place in seven days. You will be officially confirmed as the Vongola Decimo.”

“Whoa! The time has finally come!” Hayato crowed. “I’m moved beyond words!”

“But didn’t Sawada-kun inherit the title of Jūdaime when he defeated Xanxus-san?” Ryohei said. “He was the other candidate at the time. Will having a ceremony change anything?”

“Being a candidate and being confirmed is as different as officially taking over,” Renato replied. “To become the boss of the Vongola means to obtain control over Vongola families around the world. In other words, it means he’ll dominate the underworld society—once he officially takes over, that is. It’s a ceremony where great powers are passed on, and the entire mafia world is focusing on this event.

“Not only will prominent leaders of Vongola come to see the face of the next boss, powerful mafia famiglie from around the world will be arriving in Japan for the ceremony. It’s already well known that the fast rising Trad 6 will be coming, as well as the ferocious Leilei Brothers of Asia, and the Grave Diggers of Russia, the Giegue Famiglia.”

Hayato’s jaw dropped slightly. “That … legendary assassin group. The Giegue Famiglia is coming!?”

Needless to say it went downhill from there. Takeshi still wasn’t getting it, or pretending not to. Ryohei was, sadly, a bit too brainless to really understand, and Hayato was having raptures. Tsuna was just quietly panicking.

The first complication came when Tsuna was walking home from school with a transfer student and an assassin showed up. Or, as Renato told Hisui, “Some idiot from the Pesca Famiglia. Tsuna took
him out easily enough.”

The second complication was when someone managed to take out the three Giegue Famiglia members who showed up. Considering how good they were (though not Varia Quality, he could almost hear someone saying) that was a “bad thing”.

The third complication was when they arrived at Nono’s suite at the hotel and Tsuna stuttered his way into refusing to become Decimo. Nono just smiled, though Hisui could see a multitude of emotions running through the man’s eyes, and told him it was fine, that the ceremony would be canceled, and Tsuna was sent to wait outside the door for a minute.

“Please return once the child is home safely,” Nono said.

They nodded and left, and returned a short time later.

“I know how hard you tried,” Nono said, “and how much this must vex you two after giving so much time to the boy. I honestly thought for a moment there that he would hold his resolve steady. I must wonder if part of this is my own failure.”

Renato’s chin started to jut out.

“When I sealed his flames,” Nono elaborated. “I am going to have to put every available person on research, again, to try to find some hope. Lal thought she had a lead on someone in America; we shall have to press that much harder. Otherwise, we shall have to break precedent and Iemitsu will have to give up his beloved position to serve the family more directly. In the meantime, well… Please see to it that all Vongola property is retrieved, from all parties involved. The sooner we have that back, the sooner we can move forward.”

“Understood,” Renato said.

Nono gave them a tired smile and nodded, which was as good as a dismissal.

That night they made the rounds, visiting every guardian. Vongola rings, box weapon rings, Tsuna’s gloves, headphones, contacts—all of it was reclaimed. Hisui was the one to go out to Kokuyo to handle Chrome’s gear, simply because of the distance involved.

All of it was chucked into a case and delivered to the hotel in the morning. Tsuna was probably confused as to why one of them wasn’t following him around, but that explanation could come later. “I never thought I’d see the day where one of us failed a job,” Renato said, shaking his head.

Nono gave them another tired smile. “Neither did I, but I suppose there’s always a first, no? As it is, Iemitsu will have to come to a few decisions himself, and not just about potentially stepping into the role.”

Hisui’s brow went up.

“He is certain Nana is expecting again, after all these years. People have known for some time that Tsuna is here. Will Iemitsu choose to bring both of them to Italy? Just his wife, to ensure the safety of his unborn child? Neither? And what will you two do?”

“What we’ve always done,” he said. “Take assassination jobs.”

“Even if it means leaving the country?”

“It’s our job,” Renato said. “I’m a tiny bit fond of the kid and I’ve had a lot of fun with him, but
Tsuna made his choice. He can’t have it both ways.”

“I will do what I can to ensure his safety as much as I can within Namimori,” he replied, “but I can’t always be here. I, too, hold some fondness for the boy, mostly because he’s the son of my best friend, but he’s now rejected everything we’ve tried to teach him. I truly thought he had accepted the reality of his situation. What will you do if he changes his mind?”

Nono looked down and sighed. “If he made that choice I would insist he be immediately removed to Italy. But, I’m afraid, more strident measures might simply break his spirit.”

“It is … upsetting,” he said slowly, “that even with people looking up to him and showing their pride in him, or telling him…”

Nono gave him a nod. “He is family. Please do what you can for his safety, even if you can’t be here.”

“I will,” he promised, “but even that might not be enough in the end.”

He spent the next few days planning out a series of wards for the town, though powering them up initially was going to be exhausting and would have to be done in stages. For Tsuna would be a pendant he could charge with flames, intended to emit a kind of aversion field, similar to intent-based wards. In theory, once everything was set up, the town should show a marked drop in hostile activity. It was not something he had ever attempted before on that scale, so he could not guarantee the results he wanted, hence the necklace.

When the weekend rolled around they showed up for breakfast at the Sawada home as they usually did. It was interesting that Tsuna had not once showed up on their doorstep. Even so, Nana was a friend, and the change in situation would not alter their visits to her. Tsuna didn’t wander down until they were finishing up the last of their meal, and at that, the second he noticed them he stopped dead halfway down the staircase, then scurried back up.

He exchanged a look with Renato; the kitten was definitely avoiding them. Why? Who knew. The kid was probably ashamed in some way, or perhaps hoping to avoid a serious verbal altercation. Life went on for the next two months, with weekly breakfast visits to Nana, which Tsuna always avoided. Hisui spent most of his time working on warding the town when he wasn’t teaching Lambo and trying to get him to understand that throwing a grenade is not the proper way to greet strangers, while Renato took occasional jobs.

Then he was able to send off a message to Nono, saying, “I have done all I can to protect this town in the event that both Renato and I are absent. I have one thing to give to Tsuna-kun, but it will be up to him to make it work.” And he would latch the chain around the boy’s neck and seal the damn thing, along with providing a letter of explanation. “I don’t even know that it will work the way I mean it to. But aside from having a team follow Tsuna-kun for the rest of his life, foiling further assassination attempts…”

Iemitsu took Nana on a trip. Hisui and Renato were called away to Italy for a series of connected jobs—from a trusted contact, of course—and took Lambo, I-Pin, and Fūta with them, to stay at the Rozzano house. With two of them working the series they could complete things in a timely fashion and still be able to keep an eye on the children, though Dino was happy to host them when necessary.

Funnily enough, during one segment, as Hisui was doing some surveillance, he ran into Nana. She
was convinced that her little Tsu-kun had died years ago, having been run over by a car when he had attempted to save a kitten. “Such a hero’s death,” she had said wistfully, hand on the growing evidence of her pregnancy. When he got home that night he was thrilled that the kids were with Dino, as he exploded quietly. A tree in the back yard burned down in no time flat as a result.

When the reports finally came in, the only clue was some video taken by one of Hibari’s canaries. Someone with hair similar to Mukuro, but it was clearly not him. Tsuna, alone at night, walking the streets aimlessly. Tsuna, who obviously had not kept the pendant charged—or maybe it just didn’t work the way Hisui had hoped it would.
Iemitsu endeared himself to no one with the decision to go home for a visit. Whatever it was he said to Tsuna sent the kid racing out of the house. They did not find out about this until it was too late, naturally, because no one bothered to call either of them. Tsuna did come back, but Iemitsu was gone before he did.

Lambo was doing well with German and was almost ready to move on to another language, and Renato had taken to teaching the little cow mathematics as a way to try to learn to like the kid. Hayato dropped by for dinner one Monday evening—he sent a text first, just in case—and seemed horribly uncomfortable.

But finally he blurted out, “What happened!?”

His brow went up as he slid a plate of food in front of the silveret.

“Thank you. One day he was fine! And then all of a sudden, boom! He walks away. I don’t get it, I just don’t get it.”

Renato shrugged as a plate was set in front of him. “The only thing we can figure is that little trip to the future really scrambled his brains, and once he had a chance to relax in familiar surroundings and think about it, it scared the living hell out of him, the idea that you were responsible for saving multiple worlds, essentially. You will please note that it is he who is avoiding us. We still visit the house on a regular basis.”

Hayato sighed. “I’m—I’m not leaving. But—can we talk about—”

“Training to be a hitman?” he asked.

Lambo looked up at that, but quickly went back to his dinner, and Hayato nodded, looking utterly depressed.

“Well, do you have any preferences? Because I think we both know that dynamite is doable, but unlikely.”

Hayato groaned. “Well, I got some experience with shooting, sort of. I can try that. And it is a standard weapon.” He glanced at Renato. “I mean, you use them, and you’ve got such a reputation…”

Renato smirked. “Guns are elegant. A second option would be learning to use your flames without any crutches. I know of at least one person who used to disintegrate their targets with Storm Flames. It was ugly, but it got the job done, and there was never any physical evidence.”

Hayato ate thoughtfully for a minute, then nodded. “Both sound good, actually. I mean, that was never really something we learned, was it. Well, lawn-head, sort of. But neither of you ever use rings or box weapons or…”

“Not once in my entire life,” he said. “Either of us could help you with that aspect, but I think Ren-
kun would be a better teacher with guns. I know how to use them, but they are not my favorite.”

“How, ah, would I…”

“I think this counts as Plan B, Hayato-kun,” he replied evenly, “something we already promised you.”

Hayato blinked and had to set his hashi on their rest for a minute while he thought back. “Huh. You did.” He laughed a little. “I was so suspicious back then.”

Renato smirked again.

“Well, I can fit you in after school for a couple of hours for work on your flames. Lambo usually naps mid-afternoon and then does meditation for a while.”

“Lambo-san works real hard for Nagi-san!” Lambo declared happily. “Lambo-san loves his daddy!”

Hayato blinked at the little cow a few times and nodded dumbly, then leaned sideways to whisper, “Is he always that well behaved for you?”

“Always.”

“Wow.”

“Alternatively, when it doesn’t conflict with your job, come for dinner and we’ll work afterward.”

Hayato briefly went into puppy mode, something neither of them had seen in ages, and nodded enthusiastically.

After dinner he spent some time with Lambo, playing, then tucked the kid into bed. When he rejoined Renato his lover was smirking again.

“I swear, you are—I’m not sure how to put it. It’s like you being an Earth grounds just about anything volatile. The only reason Hayato is as calm as he is around me is because of proxy association.”

“Well, maybe with a little time I can show him the eye of the storm. He really improved his aim with the dynamite, after all, so he had to learn at least some focus, and putting that mathematical brain of his to work. I’ll teach him guns, too, if you’d prefer.”

“No, I’ll give it a—” Renato stopped just short of a pun. “—try.”

He simply nodded.

Hayato showed up for dinner the next night so Hisui hauled him out back afterward to start. “One of the advantages of living at the edge of town is it’s quieter and you more easily find a sense of calm,” he said, gesturing Hayato into a seat on the grass. “This will probably sound weird. I want you to think about storms, the violence of them. I also want you to think about your most prevalent feeling. Mine was irritation or annoyance. Shape that feeling, in your head, into a weapon of some kind. You’ve had experience applying resolve to the idea of sparking flames off a ring, but you don’t need a ring. You can spark those flames, shape them, and send them out.”

Hayato stared at him almost uncomprehendingly. “You were irritated and that resulted in senbon?”

“I wanted a way to—not harass, exactly, but—drive someone away without necessarily having to kill or even wound badly. Of course, I can use them to kill and have many times, but that wasn’t my
original intention. My emotion was irritation, my resolve was to drive away the cause of it, from myself, and from my friend. For me, it was that simple, but it’s true that I have flames that allow me to materialize physical objects. An untrained Storm acting off instinct can strip someone’s skin away, but I could imagine shaping Storm Flames into ephemeral blades, perhaps, that hold disintegration qualities. I’m not you, so I don’t know what would make the most sense in your head.”

“And other weapons?”

“Ano… Well, I can make almost anything I can imagine,” he said, materializing a gun in his hand, slapping a magazine into it, and shooting into the turf a short distance away. He released it and caught the ammunition, and tucked them away. “It took me a long time to be able to do that, and Ren-kun helped me, but the point is, if you can combine the spark and resolve and imagination… And once you get that down, well, it becomes reflex with practice.”

“You only ever showed them to me once,” Hayato said. “May I see them again?”

He shrugged and materialized four dozen senbon and sent them to weave a pattern in the air. “Of course, I can only manipulate them this way because I have more than one flame, but then, so do you, though none of them are quite like mine. I wonder… Perhaps if you can get it with Storm, if you could combine flame types, and if there would be a good reason to. Anyway, go ahead and get comfortable, close your eyes, and think of your emotional trigger, your Storm Flames, and some kind of weapon. That’s your exercise for the next hour or so. And if you do manage something so quickly, aim for the grass, yeah?”

Takeshi played baseball; there was no mafia game to play. Ryohei boxed; it was his passion. Chrome stuck to Kokuyo, where she felt comfortable, if not entirely accepted. Hibari did what he always did. Tsuna … drifted.

He blinked slowly and reviewed his short-term memory. “What is your reasoning?”

“Because even after all this time, and so many fights, I still don’t really know. I get it up here,” Hayato said, tapping his temple, “but I know I don’t. It’s like it’s all some cosmic joke, despite the number of people who’ve honestly threatened to end us.”

He exhaled in almost a huff, feeling mildly puzzled by the earnest request. After a moment he shrugged and fetched out his phone, then sent a text to Daisuke. The reply seemed startled, but confirmed that he would get right on that.

“Fine. He’s checking, and when I have information, I’ll let you know about the meeting. It could be as soon as tomorrow. When he comes, we can go over the folder together.”

Hayato nodded, a serious look on his face. “Just let me know.”

Daisuke arrived two days later and eyed Hayato curiously. Hisui made introductions, then accepted the folder and whipped through the contents in no time flat, then showed it to Hayato. The target was a young woman, Storm, who got back at people who upset her by disintegrating vehicle components, such as lugnuts on moving vehicles, to cause fatal accidents.

“Seriously?” Hayato said.

“There are a lot of stupid people out there,” he said. “Now, do you feel that anything is missing from this folder?”
Hayato gave him a look and went over everything in the folder very carefully, then shook his head. “Eh, not that I can see?” he said a bit uncertainly.

He nodded. “Lesson one: Have a good contact, one who provides you with what’s necessary. Who, why, proof, and how, at minimum. Having information on haunts, schedules, and so forth is always welcome. It saves time. It also means your contact’s famiglia gives a shit about its agents. Sometimes you have to track them down yourself, which can be anything from simple to why did I get out of bed this decade.” He ignored the fact that Daisuke was giving him an amused look at his lecturing tone.

Hayato set the folder down. “So with this much, you … scope out the situation, to verify, plan out how you’re going to do it, then … do it.”

He nodded again. “Yes. And then I send an innocuous text to my contact and the money shows up shortly after the hit’s been verified.”

“And there’s one fewer psycho on the streets.”

“Correct.” He glanced at the folder and shook his head. “Somebody really needs to figure out why there are so many assholes in Kobe. Lesson two: Have an excellent memory, if possible. Or some kind of unique, condensed code, so you aren’t carrying that much evidence around with you.” He looked over at his handler and said, “Consider it done, by the way. Lesson three: Know your time frame. If it’s not specified, ask. Same with if you’re not sure about how quiet the hit should be, or how gory. I’ll teach you about the money part of it later, so don’t worry about that yet.”

Hayato looked like he was about to whip out a notebook and take notes.

“So, this is a simple job,” he said as Daisuke smiled and packed up. “I have the freedom to do it the way I want to.” He waved absently as his contact saw himself out. “And since she’s creating public accidents that might kill more than just her target, I lean toward something messy and public. Now, you’ll shadow me on the job, though I think we might want to use a temporary dye on your hair. After all, we don’t generally get a lot of silver-haired non-elderly in Japan.”

Hayato frowned and reached up to pull on part of his fringe, as if it had never once occurred to him that his natural hair colour was … unusual.

Hisui could easily change it with illusions, but the boy was shadowing him for a reason, so it was better to do things properly. “Perhaps blond. A colour that light should wash back out quickly. Other alternatives are a wig or a knit cap to hide the colour. Anyway—”

“Wait,” Hayato interrupted. “He took the folder with him.”

“I have an eidetic memory,” he replied. “He knows I never need to see anything twice. So, think about how to disguise your hair, and consider wearing something that blends in better. On Saturday morning we will go scope out the situation.”

Hayato turned as green as he did every time Bianchi turned up without some sort of facial covering when Hisui exploded the target’s head. He gently kept the boy walking. By the time they arrived back at the house Hayato’s stomach seemed to have settled. After all, he had seen plenty of people smashed around; it was the death part he was unaccustomed to.

Hisui made tea—it was his go-to drink for an upset stomach—and served Hayato some, then asked, “So?”

Hayato drank half his tea before he responded. “In a way, I almost feel like I’ve been playing
Yamamoto’s mafia game all this time. It’s all flashy attacks and shouted names and posturing and it’s all mostly overblown. What would you have done if faced with that Byakuran?"

“Exploded him, preferably before he had a chance to start off some grand speech.”

Hayato nodded. “And yet we got beat to hell. Okay, you have an advantage.”

“And that advantage is?”

“Well, it’s your job to kill. But when you were with us, it wasn’t. We were fighting battles to defeat while they were usually fighting to kill.”

He smiled faintly. “It is incredibly frustrating. It’s not that we enjoy killing, Hayato-kun. But there is enjoyment in removing a threat permanently. If you go down this path, take Plan B, your mindset would need to shift. Forget about being flashy, forget about your reputation, because that comes in time, and focus on the job itself. Why you’re doing it, how to do it, and how not to be caught.”

“Can I shadow you on a few more? And then maybe try one for myself?”

He nodded. “If I take you on as my apprentice, you will get a stipend,” he said, thinking that would be one way to funnel money to the boy without it looking like charity.

It still gave Hayato pause, and though his mouth opened, no words came out before it closed. Then he nodded.

“Any job you shadow me on, you get ten percent of the payment. You will be required to plan out the hit as if you were going to complete it yourself. One thing my contacts never do is give me hits for wherever I’m living.”

Hayato nodded; it seemed that made sense to him.

“So, that requires you have good knowledge of various cities and even towns. It also means that if you don’t know the place, either don’t take the job, or be sure that you have enough time to familiarize yourself if you accept it. Now, be ready for more practice tomorrow. I’ll get in touch with Daisuke about another job soon.”

Hayato learned a new meaning to frustration, but most of that was simply that he lacked tools to work with. On the other hand, his mounting frustration meant he was close to triggering something. Hisui started transporting him to a safer place, in case the boy exploded, which he did, sending out sickles of Storm Flame and cutting down a tree at his and Renato’s old practice spot outside Kyoto.

Hayato collapsed to the ground and panted. Once he calmed down he said, “I had no control over that.”

He released his protections and nodded.

Hayato laughed weakly. “The trick now is to do it on purpose.”

He nodded again. “When I manifested lava I already had experience, so I could do it again easily enough by—going back to what made me erupt in the first place. Now, before we continue, tell me the advantages and disadvantages of what you just did.”

“Well...”
“You know, I spent so much time seeing a boss that I never saw Tsuna,” Hayato said out of the blue during one practice. “I’m not even sure I ever knew what he really liked.”

“That’s part of the burden of being a Storm, Hayato-kun.”

“Relentlessly attacking, always pushing forward.” Hayato laughed weakly. “Good thing I have an Earth to teach me.”

Hisui smiled faintly.

“What’s your burden?”


“Anyone who can make the cow kid behave…”

He supposed there was no point yet in saying that he grounded Hayato, too. The boy—though he was becoming more of a young man—would come to that conclusion eventually. A slower understanding in this case would be more beneficial. “How are your lessons with Ren-kun going?”

“Pretty good, I think,” Hayato said enthusiastically. “But he also spends a lot of time during lessons trying to rile me up.”

“Why do you think he does that?”

“…So that I can shoot even if I’m angry or, well, not calm.”

“Very good,” he praised. “He’s helping to get you to work from the eye of the storm. And it amuses him.”


He shrugged, not denying it. “Come on. I need to get started on dinner.”

“Okay. I’ll see if Lambo needs any help, then.”

He smiled faintly again. Managing to get along with varying personalities was a plus, regardless of whether or not you made friends with them.

Daisuke handed over the folder and sat back, sipping his drink. Hisui flipped through the contents and nodded slightly at Daisuke. This should be a fine first job for Hayato, assuming the kid felt he was ready. Either way, the job would be done. He handed the folder to Hayato and waited.

The boy brought out a notebook and started making notes, muttering to himself, and sketching little doodles. Life had continued on. Tsuna avoided them, Takeshi played baseball, and Ryohei boxed. The latter two would probably be fine; they had the resolve to do well with their chosen professions. Of course, neither of them did more than wave or say hello when encountered, and that was fine. It also meant his eardrums weren’t assaulted on a regular basis, and he did not have to deal with that dopey look of incomprehension.

“Okay,” Hayato said, breaking him from his thoughts. “This guy seems to keep a fairly regular schedule, so I’d say start by shadowing him around and scoping out a good sniper position. He tends to go early in the morning, which makes it easier in some ways. Fewer people to get in the way, for
one, and a better chance to get the hell out once the hit’s been made. That means thoroughly investigating any sniper spots for the best evacuation routes. What’s the time frame on this one?” he asked Daisuke. “It doesn’t say.”

“No more than two weeks.”

Hayato nodded and pulled out his laptop so he could bring up the city in question and get a satellite view—true, it was only Google Maps, but it was a start—of the area in question. He clicked around for a while as Hisui smoked a cigarette, and finally looked up. “I think it’s doable if this building was used. The building it’s next to is so close they don’t actually have facing windows, which means a sniper could rappel down the side as an exit.”

“What about the left behind equipment?” he asked.

Hayato paused, looking a bit sheepish. “Well, if it was me, I could use the rope as a conduit for Storm Flames and disintegrate the mechanism at the top. The whole thing would come down, assuming all of it didn’t disintegrate, and it could be bundled away.”

Daisuke grinned. “Not a bad idea.”

Hayato went into puppy mode briefly, then returned to being serious.

“So, Gokudera-kun,” Daisuke said, “will you take the job?”

Hayato goggled at the question. “Me?” he squeaked, then coughed and tried to pretend he never made such a sound. “Is that why there’s a two week time frame?”

Daisuke nodded. “To give you time to work out a plan if you take it on. I know the job will get done either way.”

Hayato glanced at Hisui, who nodded, then looked at his notes. “I need to run some tests first. I mean, the idea I had—I’ve never tried to do that with something strong enough to hold my weight.”

“Anything else you need before I go?” Daisuke said.

Hayato immediately went over the files again and jotted down a few more of his coded notes. They were nothing like his original G-code. He also took a long, intent look at the pictures of the target. “Okay, I’m good,” he said.

Daisuke nodded and returned the folder to his briefcase, then took his leave.

“Time for some experiments,” he said.

He hovered invisibly while Hayato got set up and in position. The boy knew he would be watching and would take over if it became necessary, because if Hayato missed he might not get a second shot. Either it was the determination to get it done right or the reassurance that someone had his back, but Hayato plugged the guy straight through the head on the first try, then immediately broke down his rifle and stowed the pieces, grabbed the spent cases and tucked them away, then was over the side of the building in a flash.

Hisui positioned himself better and waited. Hayato grabbed the cord he’d used and looked up, then unleashed his flames into it. They ran up the length like fire, destroying it as they went, and made it to the top. Hayato had found a metal pole up there and spent some time working equations to see if it
would suffice, then tied the cord around it and quick-cemented it in place.

As it was, the cord disintegrated and the pole was fine. Hisui flew down to ground level and off to the arranged meeting place, where Hayato was busy throwing up. He waited until the boy seemed to be done and handed over a bottle of water and a damp cloth. “You ready?” he asked after Hayato spat out some of the water he had used to cleanse his mouth.

Hayato wiped his face and tucked the cloth away, and recapped the bottle. “Yeah.”

He went ahead and used a micro-wormhole to remove the vomit, then started walking in the general direction of the station. Hayato didn’t have his advantages, so spoiling him now with quick transport… “You send the text yet?”

“What? Oh, right.” Hayato got his phone out and shot one off, then tucked the phone away.

Back at the house in Namimori he said, “Once you really get going I’ll show you some interesting tricks and give you something that will be very helpful. That’s assuming you want to continue. Being a hitman can be rough, after all. You don’t always get as lucky as Ren-kun and I did. That aside, you did well. You got the job done, cleaned up after yourself, and made a clean getaway.”

“Maybe I should work on hacking skills, too,” Hayato said. “Far too many places have cameras for security.”

“What you also need,” said Renato as he walked into the room, “is training in how to fend off illusions. I was thinking that we could visit Dino during summer break. Brizio could probably be convinced to assist.”

Lambo came tumbling in on Renato’s heels and jumped into Hisui’s lap. “Nagi-san! Lambo-san is here!”

He cuddled his son and kissed the top of his head. “Hello, chibi. You have a good day?”

Lambo laughed that silly laugh. “Lambo-san was favoloso! He awed and stupefied Reborn with his amazing skills at maths!”

He gave Renato an amused look. “Did you now? You know, maybe we should start up a game,” he said, glancing back down for a moment. “A paint-ball tournament.”

Renato smirked.

Life went on.
When they did show up the boys were immediately set to work catching up on all the missed school work—the girls, too, since they had shown up. But he hauled Tsuna off once everyone was settled working under Renato’s supervision and brought him to the armory. He closed the door and stared.

Tsuna broke in all of thirty seconds. “W-what?”

“What was your motivation for fighting?”

Tsuna stuttered a bit, then said, “Getting back to now.”

“Why?”

“Because we belong here.”

He scowled and Tsuna squeaked. “Not good enough. Try again.”

“Because I wanted everyone to be safe.”

His brow went up. “You were never safe. Or did you conveniently forget about all those assassination attempts against you? You are so like your mother in some ways, but you don’t have the luxury to keep doing that. If you don’t know why you’re fighting, you fail. True, you did come up with reasons to keep going, and those reasons were good enough for the situation, but you can’t keep doing this.”

“But it’s over!” Tsuna protested.

“The threat posed by Byakuran is, yes. What about all the Vongola enemies out there?”

“But she said we’d have peace!”

“From Byakuran and his schemes, and his abilities, which are now sealed. Yuni was promising that this whole sequence of events couldn’t happen again. She made no references to anything else. You’re still a damn kitten. You still have the weight of the Vongola sins on your shoulders. If you don’t man up and stop dithering around, you will never find a way to deal with that. You can’t wash them away with a better direction for Vongola if you’re going to keep squeaking like a kitten in denial and not doing anything.”

Tsuna narrowed his eyes. “I promised I’d destroy Vongola if I had to.”

He shrugged. “I see. So you do that, how?”

“…I don’t know.”
“You planning to kill Ren-kun and I? Because we’re *technically* Vongola. And Hayato-kun, Lambo-kun? Your mother is *technically* Vongola. You planning to kill your father, and Basil? Lal Mirch?”

Tsuna’s expression crumpled and he went all teary-eyed.

“Or by destroy do you mean bring the Vongola back to its original purpose? Be like the Cavallone Famiglia? Because the last time I checked, Dino-kun isn’t evil. If you don’t know why the hell you’re fighting—and I don’t refer to in-the-moment motivations—then how will you succeed? Where is your long-term plan? Push aside the fear and think, listen to your heart. Every time you’ve done that you’ve done well. I want you to see that. Nono doesn’t expect you to go on a bloody rampage, kitten. He’s hoping you’ll continue the process of redeeming the Vongola. Is that such a terrible thing? Is being asked to help make the world a better place so unbearable?”

“He’s not asking, though.”

“Yes, he is. He’s not asking if you’ll become the Vongola Decimo, because that’s a given. The lines were thoroughly researched and you’re the last living eligible candidate. Nono is *asking* you to help make Vongola better, less bloody. If you didn’t have the resolve, kitten, you’d be dead already. I am so incredibly proud of you for how well you handled yourself in the future—for the most part, anyway.” He scowled again.

“Y-you are?” Tsuna’s eyes went all wide.

“I don’t say things like that if I don’t mean them. You did a number of things that make me want to hurt you for, but overall you did wonderfully. You always found a reason to fuel your resolve, and you kept getting back up and not quitting, and finding ways to win. Ren-kun and I aren’t demonstrative people. We don’t wear our hearts on our sleeves like you do. But that doesn’t mean we don’t feel, or that we aren’t proud of you. I have one major criticism, though, but I’ll save that for when I speak to you guys as a group.”

Tsuna nodded.

He sighed and placed a hand on Tsuna’s shoulder. “Enough for now. Time for you to play catch up while I have a talk with Hayato-kun.”

When he got Hayato in the room he glared, and was pleased to see the boy shrink back. “Any ideas as to why I’m mad?”

“Uh, no?”

He shook his head. “Hayato-kun … why do you continue to try to drive away the other guardians? Act like they can’t possibly help or make a difference? Why do you keep piling the pressure on Tsuna-kun’s shoulders, as though the opinions or plans of others can’t possibly be of any worth? Why are you making him weaker? Isn’t that the exact opposite of your real intentions? Doesn’t that go against the Sky, the one person who accepts all of you for who you are? Every time you run down one of the others it’s like saying you don’t trust your Sky’s opinions, decisions, or acceptance.”

“But—”

“Now, I’m not saying Tsuna-kun is always right, because he’s not. He wouldn’t be human otherwise. But that’s part of the point: he’s human. He’s going to make mistakes, and he needs to hear ideas from other people so he can formulate a plan. Your job does not include making things harder on him. You want him to rely on you. So how about you stop, sit down, and take stock of
your fellow guardians and their abilities. Think about how you and they can best be of value in terms of a team. If you know what you’re dealing with, you can help provide sound advice to Tsuna-kun.”

“I—”

“And why are you so upset by other people offering advice? Hasn’t Tsuna-kun already accepted you? He knows just how volatile you are and he’s still right there. He spends a good deal of his free time around you, as your friend. Why are you so threatened? Don’t you want the best possible options to work with when it comes down to a crisis? How can you become the person you want to be if you’re too busy fighting your allies?”

Hayato sighed and looked sullen. “They’re so stupid at times.”

“I hate to break this to you, but sometimes so are you. Will you promise me that you’ll think about what I’ve said?”

“…Yeah,” Hayato said grudgingly.

“You probably don’t want to hear it, but I do hold some measure of fondness for you, and I want to see you succeed. That’ll be hard enough as it is without you shooting yourself in the foot to complicate matters. Now, I should point out that I think you did very well in those battles. You got cocky a little too often, but overall you kept your resolve and kept going.”

“How the hell are you so calm all the time?” Hayato asked with a frown.

“Did I never mention? My ability to feel emotions was damaged when I was not much more than a year old. It wasn’t until a good twenty years later that I was healed to some extent. I’ve had a lot of practice along the way, because the most I normally felt were negative emotions, and that usually doesn’t end well. It probably helped a great deal that I had Nana-chan for a best friend growing up, though even now she sometimes still looks surprised if I smile at her.”

Hayato blinked. “Jūdai’s mother?”

He nodded. “So, let’s get back to catching up on school work. I don’t expect you to have much trouble.”

Renato hustled Tsuna to their home after school, fending off well-intentioned but clueless guardians, and parked the kid at the kitchen table. Tsuna, of course, looked like he was about to panic.

“So, we heard some news from Nono,” he opened with. “He would like to move to confirm you as the Vongola Decimo.”

Tsuna froze, his hands clenching, but an odd look flitted over his face. “Confirm, not take over?”

“Correct,” Renato said. “You’re only fifteen. You wouldn’t be expected to officially take over until you were an adult.”

“…And this happens, how?”

Renato smiled sharply. “An Inheritance Ceremony.”

Tsuna dissolved into a babbling mess, then pulled himself together as they waited patiently. “Lots of people will there, right?”
“Yes,” he said.

Tsuna clutched at his hair and wailed. “But I always trip and make a fool of myself! And you want to put me up in front of a bunch of people!?”

“So pretend it’s just an enemy to defeat,” he said. “After the ceremonial portion of events, it’s all about mingling, and you would always have someone at your side, helping you to cope. Again, you need to remember that you’re not alone.”

Tsuna took a deep breath and exhaled noisily. “I defeated Byakuran,” he whispered, “I can do this.”

Hisui’s brow went up slowly. Tsuna had killed Byakuran, but he could see what the boy was trying to say. “Nono is making the arrangements and will be letting us know when the ceremony will happen. We need to make sure all of you who’ll be attending have proper suits.”

Tsuna looked confused for a moment, then nodded. “I guess people like Hibari-san and Mukuro-san wouldn’t want to be there.”

Nono had told them ahead of time that a replica of the Very Important Item would be used during the ceremony itself. Why it was called the Vongola Sin he had no idea, and could not be bothered to inquire. It was famiglia business, not his.

The ceremony itself went off without a hitch and Tsuna managed to get through the mingling portion without fainting, otherwise horribly embarrassing himself, or having one of his guardians do something awful. It might have helped that every time Ryohei sucked in enough air to say anything at an ear-shattering volume, Hisui was nearby with a senbon handy.

Tsuna relaxed again once everything was over and things returned to what was considered normal for their group. Then Hisui started having ants crawl up his spine again, triggered by Nana’s well-being. “Ren.”

His lover gave him a sharp look.

“The shit’s about to hit the fan. I think we should consider arranging that holiday.”

“How many?”

“The whole group, plus Nana. I don’t have a damn clue what’s wrong, but…”

“I’ve always wanted to see Tokyo Disney. I’ll get right on it. You see about convincing whoever needs to be convinced.”

He nodded and headed to the Sawada home. He would use compulsions if he had to. While he was there he left behind a few devices, as well as ones in town on the way back, so they would have some idea of what was happening while they were away. He also made the trip to Kokuyo to speak with that bunch.

Kakimoto and Jōshima ignored him, so it was Chrome who stepped toward him lightly, trident in her arms as if it substituted for Mukuro, and aimed a look of curiosity his way.

“Something is going to happen soon in Namimori, something that threatens someone I care about. We’re taking the kids on a trip. You, Jōshima-kun, and Kakimoto-kun are invited. If you would rather stay here, I suggest you stay away from the town for a while and do your shopping elsewhere.”
“W-where will you be going?”

“Tokyo Disney. Ren-kun and I have been wanting to go there for years, but we’ve never gotten around to it.” He offered her a card with a phone number on it. “Give it some thought,” he said as she took it. “We plan to ask Kyoko-chan, Haru-chan, and Hana-chan, as well, so you would have female company should you decide to accept. We plan to leave on Friday and will be gone for at least a week. Do you have any questions before I go?”

She shook her head.

He gave her a nod and departed, waiting until he was far enough away to apparate home. Chrome (and the two boys) declined the invitation a day later. Hisui shrugged and told Renato. On Friday they headed to Tokyo.

They were keeping an eye on the kids when his attention was taken up by the sound of Iemitsu arriving at the Sawada home. He had with him Colonnello, Lal Mirch, Basil, Oregano, and Tumeric. “Kami-sama,” he whispered and nudged his lover, pointing at his earpiece. “The Representative Battle of the Rainbow.”

Renato gave him a look akin to horrified, in an understated way. “And it was Nana who triggered this episode?”

He looked around to see where the kids were and nodded. “Iemitsu just got ‘home’ with a bunch of his subordinates and Colonnello,” he whispered, then removed the earpiece. “I really don’t think I want to listen any longer.”

When they got back to Namimori two weeks later the first thing anyone noticed was that Hibari was missing. One day he was there, the next he was gone. They had several emails from Nono, who knew they would be out of town, waiting for them.

Iemitsu had been transformed into the Sky Arcobaleno. Renato laughed so hard he fell off his chair.

Hibari was the Cloud Arcobaleno. For Lightning, Gamma. For Mist, Torikabuto. For Storm, Bel. For Sun, Daisy. And for Rain, Basil.

Both Hisui and Renato felt twinges of upset at that knowledge. Somewhat upsetting was that the Arcobaleno they had known were gone. They sat in silence for some time, adjusting to that knowledge.

Then Renato wondered, “Will Hibari still be Tsuna’s guardian, or will we have to track down a new one?”

He rolled his eyes. “Of more interest, why now? Everything we knew from the future says the Arcobaleno were alive well past this point and were killed by Byakuran’s meddling. Was it because they came here briefly, to ensure the memories were distributed? Could that doubling up have strained whatever function the Arcobaleno serve? To the point where they had to be—”

Renato shook his head. “You have a point. But I don’t think I’m going to investigate. I already dodged the bullet once.”

Nana realized she was pregnant not long after. Word had it that Iemitsu had been planning to have a letter of regret sent stating he had been killed in a tragic penguin-related accident in Antarctica, but refrained for fear it would cause harm to his wife and unborn child. He sent a frantic letter to Hisui asking that he keep an eye on her for him. Either way, he would still be sending plenty of money to the account his wife accessed. He had also changed his name to Cielo.
Life went on, except for those who died.

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